SCIENCE FICTION

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GALAXY

MAGAZINE

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THE LAST HUNT

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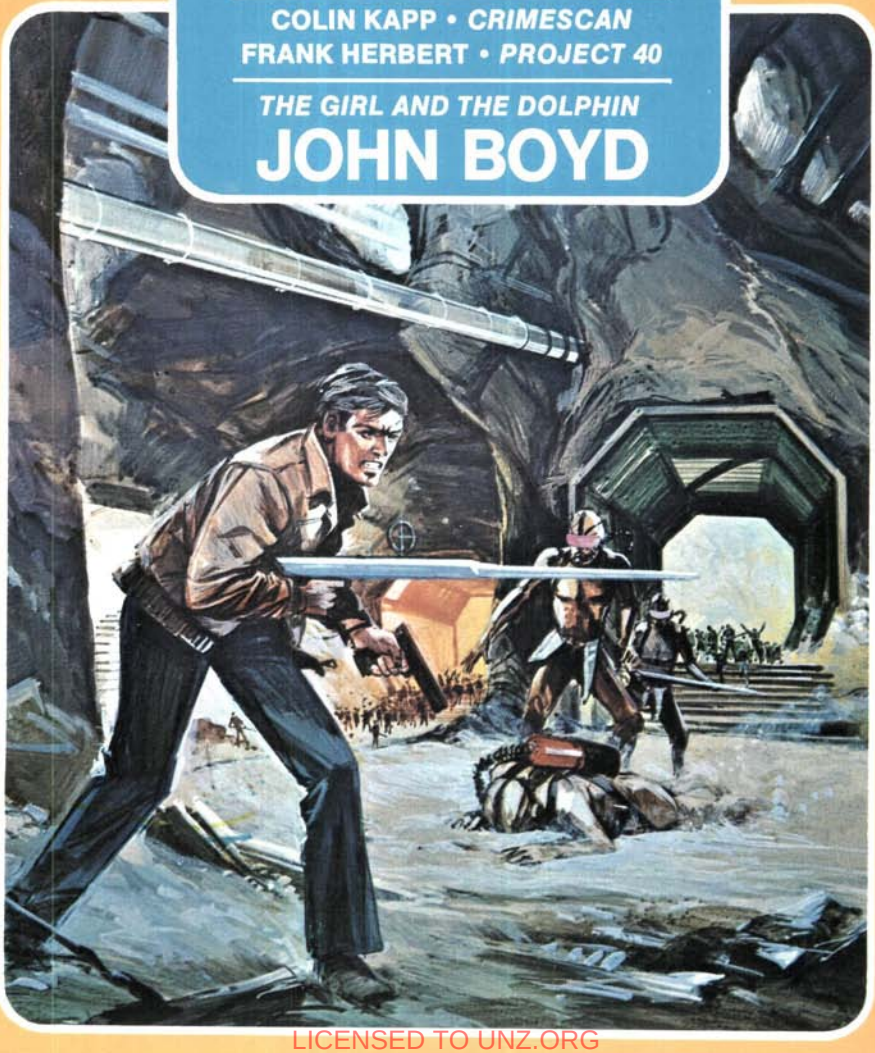
THE GIRL AND THE DOLPHIN
JOHN BOYD



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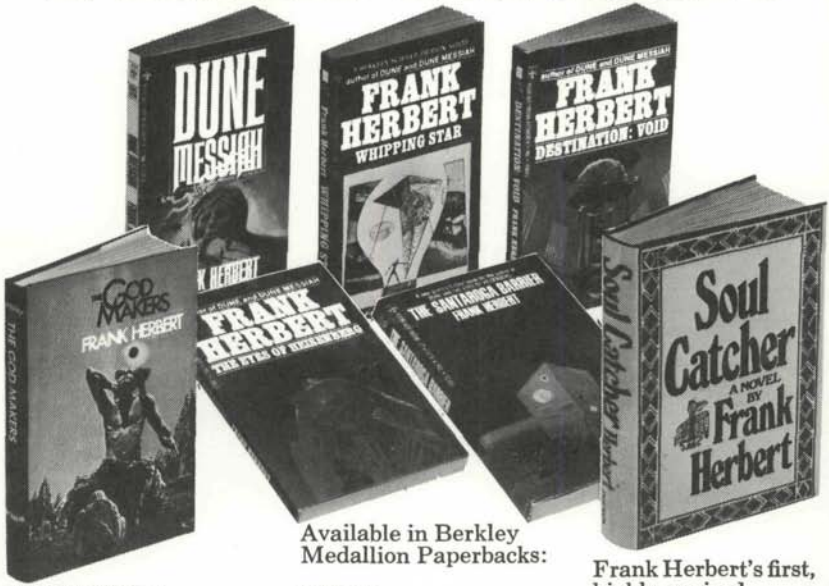

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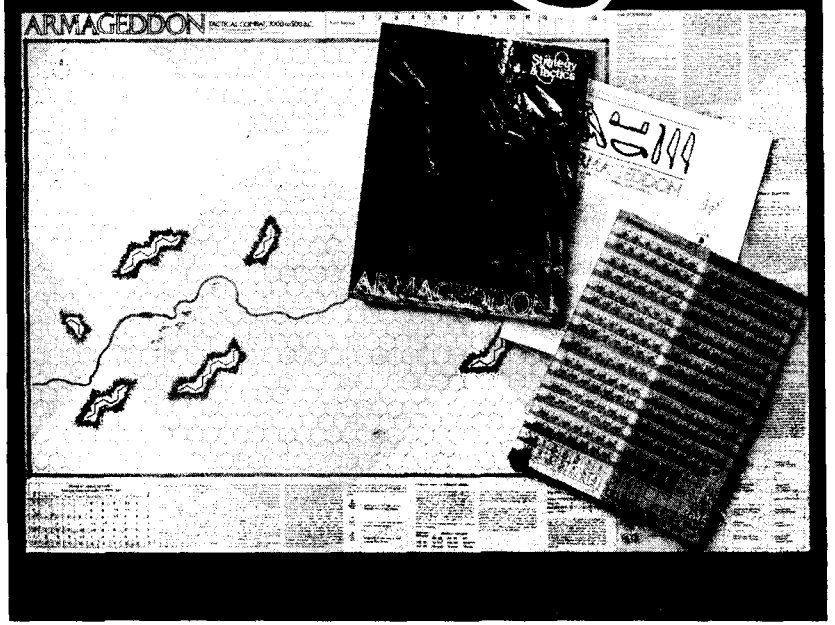

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March-April 1973
Vol. 33, No. 5

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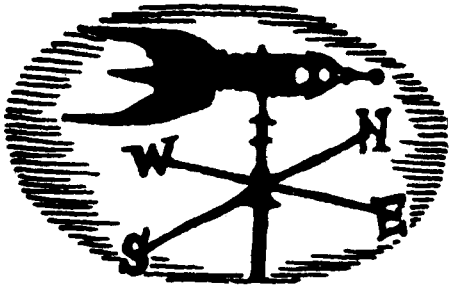

DIRECTIONS

Directions:

I've been reading the letters published in Directions *and seem to detect a trend toward dealing with science fiction as "Literature" or "Art." Despite the fact that I'm one of those college professors who are ruining the field by teaching courses in it, I'm not sure I'm entirely happy with this development. So much of what we hear from individuals like Pierce or Chauvin isn't really criticism.*

Science-fiction readers have suddenly become terribly conscious of the fact that they are no longer living in a literary ghetto. We get individuals like A. J. Budrys dropping out of active reviewing and P. Schuyler Miller apologizing for not being an "intellectual."

I'm not saying that we should revert to the old lettercols when every other word was: "Wow!" "Fantastic!" or "Supergalactic!" Criticism is necessary, particularly if you consider the critical act as one which demonstrates value where none was perceived before. There are, however, two types of critical work. One is an extremely complicated, technical exercise practiced by PhDs in Literary Criticism that bears about as much relationship to writing as the theoretical physicist bears to a TV repairman putting in a new picture tube. One man works with theory; the other makes it work.

Judy Merril, whatever you thought about her championing of the New Wave and Speculative Fabulation, was and is a damn good writer who paid her dues grinding out pulp fiction and polishing her craft. Her critical works are the gut reaction of a sensitive individual who perceives something of value and worth in the neglected and otherwise unremarked stories that came to her attention. Blish and Knight are good writers who have given excellent technical critiques of the craft.

Alexei and Cory Panshin are writers who have bothered to master the jargon and technical tools of literary criticism and can speak from both the theoretical and practical viewpoint. None of these three groups of critics is inherently "better" than the others. All are good because they excel in the areas they have delineated for themselves. I much prefer what Budrys or Miller or Sturgeon write in their review columns to what a dozen dogmatic pseudo-critics churn out.

The prime idiocy of all this critical jousting is the attempt to define sf. Science fiction is not a genre but a technique. Genre criticism is only one way of approaching a work of fiction and, to my mind, it's not the best. If I wish to use a Socialist Realism framework in my criticism I can easily demonstrate that Tolkien's Lord of the Rings *is better hardcore sf than Larry Niven's* Ringworld. *Using a Formalist approach I can show that* Lord of the Rings *isn't even a novel and that 25% of what is published in the sf magazines isn't even fiction.*

Ivor A. Rogers
Des Moines, Ia.

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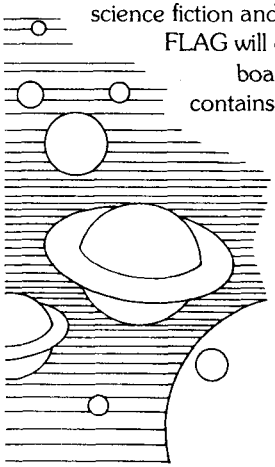

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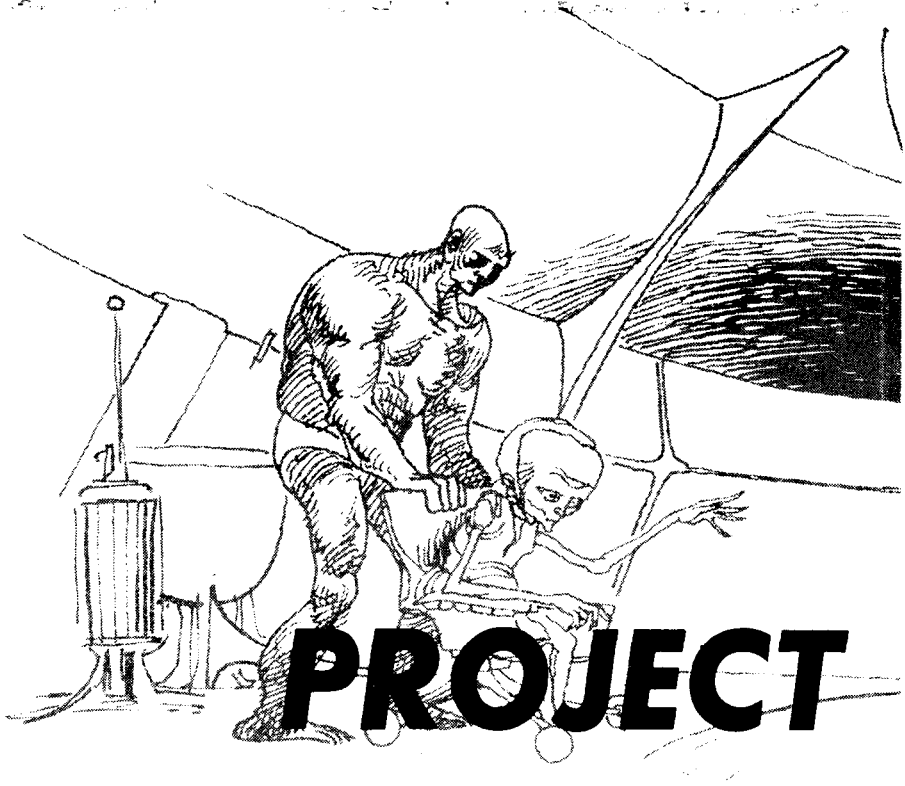

PROJECT

WHAT HAS GONE BEFORE

Story opens with undercover agent CARLOS DEPEAUX trying to blend with southeast Oregon scenery while keeping a careful watch on an innocuous farmhouse through powerful binoculars. Some distance away his fellow agent, a girl named TYMIENA, keeps the farm under electronic and radar surveillance from a specially equipped van camper. Ostensibly CARLOS and TYMIENA are nature-loving husband and wife on a camper vacation—CARLOS is a birdwatcher, if anyone should ask.

He is, however, chilled by a growing awareness that he is the only life form—other than plants—in the vicinity of the farm. There are no birds, no animals small or large, not even insects around. Adding to his unease is the knowledge that his predecessor, PORTER, vanished without a trace while watching this same lack-life farm. Carlos knows, of course, that the farm's proprietor, NILS HELLSTROM, is no farmer, but is noted for making documentary films about insects. He is also suspected of being in the process of developing a superweapon that would give world dominion to any nation possessing it—and no one is quite sure of HELLSTROM'S loyalties. The weapon is described as a "toroidal field disruptor," is capable of altering matter over great distances and its existence has been deduced from specifications that a HELLSTROM aide

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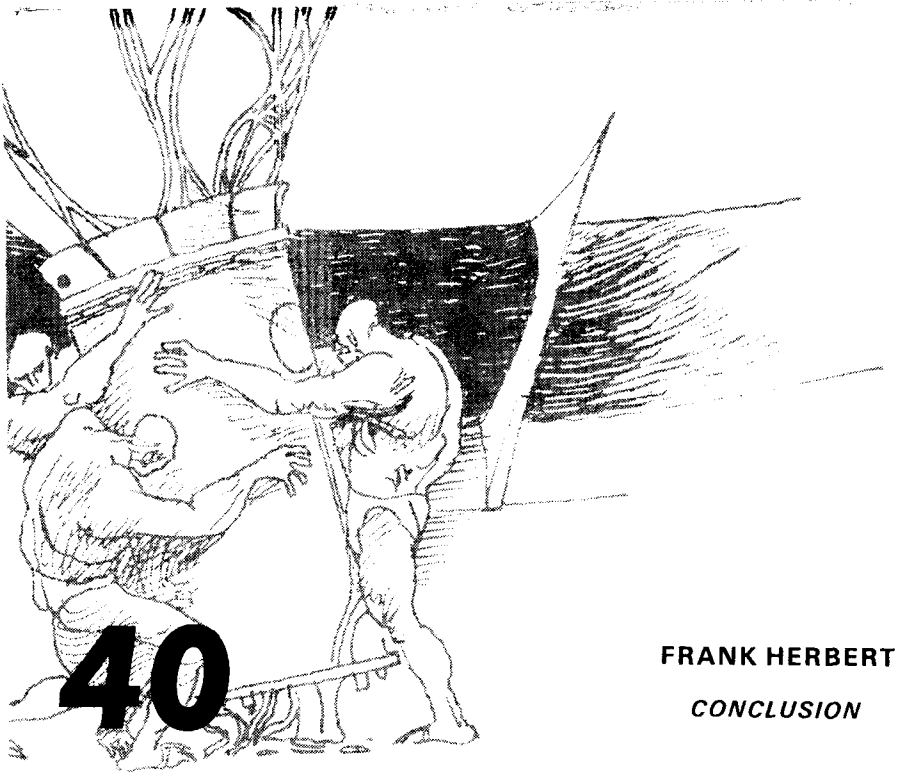

40

FRANK HERBERT

CONCLUSION

inadvertently left in an MIT library. The specs were labeled: Project 40.

CARLOS and TYMIENA are employed—as was PORTER—by a Government "Agency" so top-secret it has no other name. It is headed by a man equally nameless, who is responsible only to the President—not even to God. His aide is totally ruthless, physically powerful, top-level I.Q. DZULE PERUGE; operations director is a nonentity named JOSEPH MERRIVALE.

What the Agency does not know is that Hellstrom heads a 300-year-old cult of humans who have patterned their culture, genetics and thought processes upon those of insects as a survival measure. Bred for intelligence, cult members have infiltrated society at large at all levels of authority, including branches of Government.

A small nation of HELLSTROM'S subjects lives underground in the honeycombed hill—or Hive—under HELLSTROM'S farm. The Hive's main objective for centuries has been to become impregnable. Its weaponry and science surpass anything found outside. Each individual in it is an expert, bred for a single specialty for generations. Life expectancy in the Hive is several times the "wild" human lifespan.

CARLOS and TYMIENA are captured by the Hive and the Agency sends a small task force headed by DZULE PERUGE himself, seconded by top agents EDWARD JANVERT and his girl, CLOVIS CARR, to investigate the latest disappearance.

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While the task force, under JANVERT, keeps HELLSTROM'S farm under discreet surveillance, PERUGE attempts to find out what has happened to CARLOS and TYMIENA from local Sheriff's Deputy LINCOLN KRAFT. He becomes convinced—and correctly—that KRAFT is one of HELLSTROM'S people. PERUGE forces KRAFT to take him to the farm, where HELLSTROM receives him openly, takes him on a tour of his movie studio. There PERUGE meets lovely FANCY KALOTERMI, a HELLSTROM aid, whose Hive-conditioned breeding instincts become aroused.

That same night, however, young FANCY meets PERUGE in his motel room in town and, after using a Hive "breeding" formula on him, subjects him to such vigorous activity that in the morning—after warning JANVERT by radio—PERUGE collapses and dies. Of exhaustion—or from the HIVE formula?

XXII

The Wisdom of Harl: By the stance you take against the universe it is possible to destroy yourself.

HELLSTROM turned left into the main gallery outside the Security chamber instead of going directly to his cell. He swung left again down a side ramp and, at the ramp's end, entered the opened gap of an express elevator when a car appeared. He jumped out of the moving car at Level Fifty-one into another wide gallery. This one showed less activity than the upper chambers and conveyed a deep sensation of cushioned stillness. Workers here moved with a cat-footed softness and a sense of silent importance.

Hellstrom made his way among them and not until he was actually walking through the widely arched entrance to the Project 40 lab did he begin to review what he would tell the specialists.

Outsiders think this is an invention dealing with the making and forming of metals such as steel. They obtained this impression from studying only pages 17 through 41 of Report TRZ88a. They obviously are aware of the heat problem from knowing about only this tiny part of your work.

That should do it. Brief enough to satisfy the Physical Researchers' characteristic impatience with all interruptions, but containing the essential information plus his own primary observation.

Hellstrom stopped just inside the doorway of the cavernous, domed lab to await a break in the activities that would allow his interruption. One did not intrude here except on the most urgent matters. These specialists were notoriously short-tempered.

Twenty of them were at work on a massive tubular object in the brilliantly floodlighted center of the lab, each specialist attended by a muscular symbiote. These Physical Researchers were precious to the Hive and so difficult to bring into being, so difficult to maintain even then. Their gigantic heads—fifteen inches from a snowy hairline to the bottom of a hairless chin, eleven inches across the brow above bulging blue eyes that stood out

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with a startling glitter in their black skins—told of the caesarian birth of each of them. No female had ever borne more than three—breeding was limited by many natural abortions in early pregnancy. Death of the mother at birth was common with these prized specialists—a price the Hive paid willingly. The Researchers had proved their worth countless times and were a major reason the First Colonists had ended their centuries of secretive migrations. These specialists must be concealed from Outsider eyes at all costs. Their work must be hidden as well—it stamped the Hive-born with another kind of strangeness. The stunwand, of which Project 40 was an outgrowth, was only one of their creations. They had given the Hive's electronic instruments a marked edge in reliability, subtlety and power. They had produced the newest refinements in food additives.

The Physical Researchers were instantly recognizable as different from any other worker. The gene line that produced them carried characteristics incapable of being separated from the sought-after specialization and marked them as even further differentiated from the original wild form. Their legs were stunted stumps and each Researcher required the constant attendance of a pale, muscular, chemically neutered worker bred especially for brawn and a pliable disposition. Because of the useless legs these specialists were wheeled about on spidery carts or carried in the attendants' arms. Although the Researchers' arms were not stunted, they were spindly and weak, with hands that bore long, delicate fingers. These specialists were also genetically sterile, each one a single creation ending in its own flesh. Since their driving need for full intellect meant they could not have their emotions chemically tempered, they tended to a touchy irascibility in their dealings with all other workers. Even their symbiote attendants came in for such attacks. The Researchers were gentle and showed a high degree of mutual consideration with their fellow specialists, however—a characteristic the Hive had managed to breed into them after a series of conflicts had reduced the usefulness of the first of the type.

One of the busily working specialists finally stopped, peered across the lab at Hellstrom and signaled in Hive-sign: *Don't delay this.* In the same movement of hand and fingers the specialist pressed further symbols upon its forehead: *Your interruptive presence delays my thinking.*

Hellstrom hurried briskly across the room. He recognized the Researcher as one of the elders in this breed, a female whose skin bore numerous ropy scars of experiments gone awry. She was attended by a pale, bent-shouldered neuter-male whose arms and torso bulged with muscles. The latter watched in cowed diffidence as Hellstrom flashed his report in abbreviated Hive-sign.

What do we care what Outsiders believe? she demanded.

They were able to deduce the heat problem from just these few pages, Hellstrom signaled.

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She spoke aloud then, knowing that voice could convey more of her irritation. "You think Outsiders can teach us?"

"We often learn from their mistakes," Hellstrom said, refusing to respond to her anger.

"Be still a moment," she ordered and closed her eyes.

Hellstrom knew those reference pages would be flashing before her awareness, the data on them being correlated with their present work and Peruge's mistaken belief.

Presently she opened her eyes and said, "Go away."

"Does this help you?" Hellstrom asked.

"It helps," she said, emitting the admission in a grudging growl and adding with a return of her former irritability: "Apparently your type can learn an occasional thing of value—when you have a lucky accident."

Hellstrom managed to restrain a grin until he had turned away and was headed back across the lab. When he glanced back from the doorway he saw several specialists clustered into a busily communicative group, their hands darting and flashing in Hive-sign. He caught the symbol for *heat* several times, but most of the other symbols escaped him. The Researchers had developed their own special language for use among themselves, he knew. They would have this new data all sorted out and introduced into their project in a very short time.

Privately circulated memo to the Agency board members: DESTROY THIS IMMEDIATELY AFTER READING. There is more to the Hellstrom File than we have been shown. They are holding out on us. Our other source says the MIT papers contained at least three additional pages. These indicate that Project 40 involves a new and far cheaper process of manufacturing and forming steel and that it is not a weapon at all. As I have told you all time and again, I knew this pair would try something like this on their own some day. They are through as of now!

Mimeca Tichenum's report on Outside use of Hive stores: Within a few seconds after injection of our breeder formula the skin of the Outsider male becomes warm to the touch and somewhat flushed. This is similar to the reaction of Hive males, but more pronounced, also more rapid. The reaction takes no more than five to ten seconds. The dissimilarities then become quite pronounced. The Outsider male sometimes displays an initial muscle rigidity, in actuality a shock response, which holds him virtually immobile until the major breeder transformations have occurred. Concurrent with these the male emits a bitter-smelling perspiration which appears to be characteristic in all cases and which I find extremely exciting. It appears to accelerate and heighten the full spectrum of my female breeding responses. This bitter

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smell may represent a hormone in the same class as our XB5 formula which, you will recall, elicits a quite similar female response, although one not as extreme as what I am describing. In general, I would say that those elements of the usual Hive breeding responses which are conscious initially among our males tend, with Outsider males, to be involuntary when subjects are injected with our male breeder hormones. My own personal reaction (in which my sisters concur) is to find these Outsider responses tremendously more stimulating than the usual Hive breeding responses.

THE hour was twenty minutes to twelve and for the past thirty minutes Hellstrom had been pacing about the farmhouse dining room wondering if his preparations were adequate. The room had been decorated originally as a front showpiece, a place to entertain the occasional Outsider business contact. A long Jacobean table with ten matching chairs around it was the central feature. A polished glass chandelier glittered over the table. A breakfront china cabinet stacked with heavy blue crockery dishes occupied almost all of one wall opposite the arch to the living room. Bay windows, tall and many-paned, faded lace curtains drawn back from them, gave a view of willows along the creekbank. A swinging door with a tiny glass window inset near the top opened into the kitchen.

Four places had been set at the kitchen end of the large table.

The closer the hour of Peruge's arrival, the thinner Hellstrom's earlier elation had worn—and now Peruge was late.

Mimeca was helping in the kitchen. And from time to time Hellstrom glimpsed her through the glass inset in the door. She was enough like Fancy to be a genesister, but Mimeca was from a parallel breeding strain, not the FANCY line. The dark hair and pale, faintly rosy skin seemed to have linked itself genetically to other characteristics the Hive sought in its breeders—high fertility, independence of imagination, drive to succeed, loyalty and intelligence.

Hellstrom glanced at the old-fashioned pendulum clock beside the door to the kitchen. A quarter to twelve and still no sign of Peruge. Why would he be late? What if he had decided not to come, but to take some other action? Could he already have discovered something incriminating about that damned bicycle? Peruge was perfectly capable of showing up with the FBI. But with Mimeca playing the role of Fancy, the Hive might yet confound the hunters. Fingerprints would not match. She had not been bred recently and that could be proved by medical examination. He would insist upon an Outside medical examination. That would serve the double purpose of getting every one of the intruders away from here.

He heard the outer door to the front hall open.

Could that be Peruge at last?

Hellstrom strode through the

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archway into the living room featuring early twentieth-century furnishings and carefully maintained musty smells. As quickly as he went, he was only half way across the room when a stranger entered two steps ahead of Saldo. The stranger was a diminutive male—an inch or so shorter than Saldo—with windblown brown hair, a cautiously reserved manner behind the eyes. He appeared to be only in his early twenties, but Hellstrom sometimes had found age difficult to determine with small Outsiders. The stranger wore tan work pants, heavy boots, a white turtleneck shirt of some light fabric that allowed reddish chest hairs to poke through. A brown buckram jacket with slash pockets had been pulled over the shirt. The right-side pocket bulged as though it concealed a gun. Pale yellow grass seeds could be seen sticking in the man's trouser cuffs.

He stopped short when he saw Hellstrom, then barked: "You are Hellstrom?"

Saldo, two paces behind the stranger, flashed a warning signal in Hive-sign.

"Dr. Hellstrom, this is Mr. Janvert, an associate of Mr. Peruge's. Mr. Janvert parked his car down by the old sawmill turn and walked in across the meadow."

Walked in? Hellstrom wondered. Reference to that route across the meadow bothered him. That was the path Depeaux had taken.

Saldo moved to stand on Janvert's right, again flashed a warning signal, said, "Mr. Janvert has shocking news. He tells me that Mr. Peruge is dead."

THE information momentarily stunned Hellstrom. He tried to assess it, his mind racing. Fancy? No, she had said nothing about . . . He saw that some response was expected, allowed his surprise to come out naturally.

"Dead? But I was—" Hellstrom gestured toward the dining room—"expecting—I mean, we'd made another date for— What happened? How did he die?"

"We're still trying to find out," Janvert said. "Your deputy tried to prevent our taking the body, but we got a court order from a Federal judge in Salem. Peruge's body is on its way to the University of Oregon Medical School in Portland." Janvert seemed to be assessing Hellstrom's response. "We'll have an autopsy report very soon."

Hellstrom pursed his lips. He didn't like the way Janvert had said *your deputy* . . . What had Linc done? Were there more mistakes to contend with?

"If Deputy Kraft interfered, that's regrettable," Hellstrom said, "but that certainly has nothing to do with me. He is not our deputy."

"Let's stop the bullshit," Janvert said. "One of your dames spent last night with Peruge and she shot him full of some kind of dope. There was a bruise on his arm as big as a dollar. We're going to find out what that was. We're going to bring in the FBI, the Alcohol Tax people—they deal with narcotics crimes, you know—and we're going to open your farm up like a can of rotten worms!"

"Just a minute now," Hellstrom said, trying to suppress his panic. *Open up the farm!* "What's this

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about someone spending the night with Mr. Peruge? Narcotics? What are you saying?"

"A hot little doll from your outfit by the name of Fancy," Janvert said. "Fancy Kalotermi, I think her full name is. She spent last night with Peruge and she shot him full of—"

"This is nonsense," Hellstrom interrupted. "Are you saying one of— Fancy? She had some sort of sexual liaison with Mr. Peruge, did she not?"

"Did she ever! Peruge told me the whole story. She shot him full of dope and we're betting that's what killed him. We're going to question your Miss Kalotermi and the rest of your people. We're going to get to the bottom of this."

Saldo cleared his throat, trying to distract Janvert, give Hellstrom time to think. These words pointed in profoundly disturbing directions. Saldo felt all of his Hive-defense reactions coming to full-alarm state. He had to restrain himself consciously from launching a physical attack on Janvert.

Janvert spared only a glance for Saldo. "You got something to add?"

Before Saldo could respond Hellstrom asked, "Who is this 'we' you keep referring to, Mr. Janvert? I confess I don't understand this at all. I had taken a liking to Mr. Peruge and he—"

"Don't spare any of your *liking* for me," Janvert said. "I don't go for the way you *like* people. As for your question—it has a simple answer. The FBI will be here presently and Alcohol Tax officers. If we think of any others who want to share in this investigation we'll invite them."

"But you have no official standing, Mr. Janvert—is that right?"

Janvert took a moment to reassess Hellstrom. There had been an edge to the question he did not like. Janvert moved unconsciously a pace away from Saldo.

"Is that correct?" Hellstrom insisted.

Janvert set his jaw belligerently. "You'd better be damn careful about my official standing, Hellstrom. Your Miss Kalotermi rode a bicycle to Peruge's motel. That bicycle was the property of one Carlos Depeaux, another of our people we suspect you took a *liking* to."

Stalling for time to think, Hellstrom said; "You're going too fast for me. Who is this—oh, yes, the employe Mr. Peruge was seeking. I don't understand about a bicycle, but— Are you trying to tell me you also work for this fireworks company, Mr. Janvert?"

"You're going to see more than fireworks around here in a bit," Janvert said. "Where is Miss Kalotermi?"

Hellstrom's mind was turning over possible responses at top speed. His first reaction was to be thankful he had had the foresight to get Fancy out of sight in Gestation and substitute Mimeca. The very worst had happened—they had traced that damned bicycle! Still stalling for time, he said, "I'm afraid I don't know exactly where Miss—"

Mimeca took this moment to step through the arch from the

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dining room. The kitchen door could be heard slapping to a closed position behind her. She evidently assumed Janvert was the expected luncheon guest.

"There you are," she said. "Lunch is getting cold."

"WELL, here she is now," Hellstrom said, flashing a signal for Mimeca to be silent. "Fancy, this is Mr. Janvert. He has brought us sorrowful news. Mr. Peruge is dead under circumstances that sound rather mysterious."

"How awful!" she exclaimed, responding to another signal from Hellstrom.

Hellstrom looked at Janvert, wondering if the substitution would be accepted. Mimeca fitted Fancy's description very closely. Even their voices were similar.

Janvert glared at her, demanded, "Where the hell did you get that bicycle? What kind of dope did you use to kill Peruge?"

Mimeca put a hand to her mouth, startled. The anger mixed with fear obvious in Janvert, the sharp voice and unexpected questions, all seemed to confuse her.

"Just a minute here." Hellstrom signaled in Hivesign for her to follow his lead. He faced her squarely, a stern look on his face, spoke like a demanding parent. "Fancy, I want you to tell me the truth. Did you spend last night with Mr. Peruge at the motel?"

"With—" She shook her head dumbly from side to side. Hellstrom knew his alarm was a palpable thing to her and she could see Saldo actually trembling. The silence in the room became deep and charged while she framed her answer. "I—of course not!" she said. "You both know that. I was here in the—"

She broke off. Hellstrom guessed she had almost said *Hive*. The extreme tensions in this room carried a deeply disturbing current. He signaled her to get herself under better control.

"She was here in the house last night," Saldo said. "I saw her myself."

"So that's the way you're going to play it." Janvert stared at Mimeca. "There's going to be more law swarming over this place in a couple of hours than you've ever seen—they are going to pick her up for questioning. Don't try to hide her or sneak her away. Her fingerprints were all over that bicycle and all over Peruge's room. She's going to have some mighty interesting questions to answer."

"That may be so," Hellstrom said, his voice firming as he saw his preparations providing the escape route he had anticipated. Mimeca's fingerprints were all over nothing. "But you, I take it, Mr. Janvert, are not the law. Until the law—"

"I told you to can the bullshit," Janvert said.

"I can understand why you're upset," Hellstrom said, "but I do not care for your tone or your attitude—or for your choice of language in front of this young woman. I am going to have to ask you—"

"What are you trying to pull off?" Janvert demanded. "Choice of language in front of this young woman? She was bedded with Pe-

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ruge last night and she knew more tricks than he'd ever heard of. Choice of words?"

"That is really quite enough!" Hellstrom exploded. He signaled frantically for Mimeca to leave in a huff, but she seemed too intent now on Janvert to notice.

"Bedded?" she demanded. "I don't even know your Mr. Peruge."

"That won't work, sister," Janvert said. "I promise you, it won't work."

"You don't have to answer any more of his questions, Fancy," Hellstrom said.

"That's right," Janvert said, "shut her up until you get your stories straight. But I promise you, it won't work. The physical evidence—"

"Indeed," Hellstrom interrupted. "The physical evidence." He sighed with elaborate sadness. It was going perfectly. He faced Mimeca. "Fancy, my dear, you don't have to say another thing until the officials get here, if they do indeed choose to come for such an outrageous—"

"Oh, they'll come," Janvert said. "And when they do I expect some damned interesting answers based on the physical evidence."

SALDO, still trying to suppress his Hive-protection conditioning, gestured to catch Hellstrom's attention, asked, "Nils—should I put him off the place?"

"That won't be necessary," Hellstrom said, gesturing for Saldo to control himself. Saldo obviously was in no condition to risk physical contact with Janvert. There would be another killing.

"You're damned right it won't be necessary," Janvert said. He put a hand into the bulging pocket of his jacket, moved another two paces away from Saldo. "Don't even try it, baby, or I'll fix you permanently."

"Here! Here!" Hellstrom snapped. "That's quite enough of that!" He looked squarely at Saldo. "What you can do, Saldo, is try to get a call through to Deputy Kraft. If what Mr. Janvert says is true, I don't understand why Kraft is not here already. See if you can contact him and ask him to—"

"Kraft is very busy on a telephone call from his Lakeview office," Janvert said. "Your tame deputy is occupied, understand? Nobody is going to come here and rescue you or interfere in any way before the arrival of the FBI."

Hellstrom saw a tight smile appear on Janvert's face, realized abruptly that the Outsider was playing some kind of calculated game. Did Janvert actually possess police authority? Was it possible he was trying to provoke an incident that would allow him to take charge here until the others arrived? There were many things that had to be done to protect the Hive before the arrival of Outsider police. Would Janvert try to stop anyone from leaving this room?

"Saldo," Hellstrom said, "as lamentable as this situation is we still have deadlines to meet, work to do. Delays are costly." Hellstrom signaled for Saldo to leave, get about sealing up the Hive against an all-out investigation. "I suggest you get about that work," Hellstrom said. "We'll wait here with—"

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"Nobody leaves," Janvert snapped. He took another step away from Saldo. "This is a murder investigation. If you think you can cover—"

"I think if this turns out to be anything at all it will be considerably less than a murder investigation," Hellstrom said. He signaled urgently for Saldo to leave. "I know for a fact that Fancy did not leave the farm last night. Meanwhile, Mr. Saldo is vitally important to the film we're making. That film represents an investment of several hundred thousand dollars already and it's due in Hollywood in little more than a month. He obviously has taken time off from his work to greet you and escort you to—"

"I was taking a walk after the lunch break," Saldo said, picking up his cue. He glanced at his wristwatch. "My God—I'm late! Ed will be clawing the wall!" He whirled, strode briskly toward the hall and the outer door.

"Just a minute, you—" Janvert shouted.

Saldo ignored him. Hellstrom's command in Hive-sign had been explicit and brooked no disobedience. Janvert obviously carried a weapon, but the situation was desperate. Would he use it? Saldo continued unswerving toward the door. The Hive required this of him.

"I'm telling you to stop or else!" Janvert yelled. He moved to the archway into the hall, tried to keep his attention on Saldo's retreating back and the pair in the living room at the same time. Saldo had the door open.He was going out.

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The door closed.

"Mr. Janvert," Hellstrom said.

Janvert turned, glared at Hellstrom.

"Mr. Janvert," Hellstrom repeated, his tone reasonable, "as difficult as this situation is, I would appreciate our not adding to its complications. We were expecting Mr. Peruge for luncheon and it would be a shame to waste that food. I'm sure all of our tempers would improve it we—"

"You think I'd eat anything here?" Janvert asked.

Hellstrom shrugged. "Apparently we must wait for the law to arrive and you do not want Fancy or me to leave your presence. I am proposing a reasonable solution to the waiting period. I'm sure there's a simple answer to these disturbing matters and I am only trying to—"

"Sure you are. And you like me!"

"No, Mr. Janvert, I don't particularly care for you. And I'm sure Fancy shares my aversion. My concern simply goes to—"

"Will you knock off this innocent act?"

JANVERT felt himself seething with rage and frustration. He should not have let that other character get out of here. He should have shot at the guy's legs, brought him down.

"If you're worried about our food, Mr. Janvert," Mimeca said, "I'd be only too happy to taste everything before you eat it." She glanced worriedly at Hellstrom. Nils had said he counted on the visitor's eating their food—but this was a different visitor.

"Taste my—" Janvert shook his head from side to side.

Mimeca glanced at Hellstrom, seeking a sign of what to do.

"She's only trying to make you comfortable," Hellstrom explained and, using Hive-sign, told Mimeca: *Get him to eat with us!* He watched Janvert carefully. That had been close with Saldo. Janvert had almost used that weapon in his pocket. Were these Outsiders really that desperate?

"We've already had our sample of how Miss Fancy makes men comfortable," Janvert responded. "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Well, I am going to eat my lunch," Hellstrom said. "You may join us or not as you prefer." He crossed to Mimeca, took her arm. "Come along, my dear. We've done our best."

Janvert had no choice except to follow them into the dining room. He noted the four places set at the table there, wondered whom the fourth place signified? Kraft? Saldo?

Hellstrom seated Mimeca with her back to the china cabinet, took the chair at the head of the table with his back to the kitchen door. He indicated the chair opposite Mimeca for Janvert.

"At least, you can sit down with us."

Janvert ignored the invitation, strode deliberately around the table and took the chair beside Mimeca.

"Wherever you wish," Hellstrom said.

Janvert glanced at the woman. She sat with hands folded in her lap, looking down at her plate almost in an attitude of prayer. *Look*

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as innocent as you want, honey! Janvert thought. *We have you right where we want you. And if* you *try to sneak off the way your friend did I really will shoot. We'll worry about consequences later. I might not even aim for your legs.*

"We're having baked pork chops," Hellstrom said. "Are you sure I can't order a serving for you?"

"Not on your sweet life or mine," Janvert said. "Especially mine." He glanced up alertly, tension appearing in his gun arm, as the kitchen door creaked open. An older, gray-haired woman with dark olive skin and startlingly bright blue eyes came through the door. Her heavily wrinkled face creased into a smile as she peered questioningly at Hellstrom. Janvert jerked his attention to Hellstrom, caught a strange flicker-fingered gesture from the man, obviously directed at the older woman. At the same time a message-loaded look passed between Hellstrom and the younger woman seated beside him.

"What are you doing there?" Janvert demanded.

Hellstrom noted Janvert's attention on the hand signal, looked up at the ceiling with a weary expression. Janvert was going to be very difficult unless they got him to eat. There were so many things that needed doing and Saldo was too young to be trusted with all of them. He had older advisers to consult, but a headstrong character was developing in Saldo, one Hellstrom knew he had to curb. Saldo might not consult the backup brains in the Hive.

"I asked you a question," Janvert pressed, leaning toward Hellstrom.

"I was trying to enlist my associates in helping me to calm you down and get you to join us for luncheon," Hellstrom said, his voice weary. Would Janvert buy that?

"Fat chance," Janvert said. He looked back at the older woman. She still stood expectantly behind Hellstrom, one hand holding the kitchen door open. Why didn't the old bitch say something? Was she just going to wait there until someone told her what to do? Apparently that was just what she was going to do.

A long silence dragged out while the odd tableau continued.

Have I judged him correctly? Hellstrom wondered. *Should I signal for the serving to go ahead as ordered?*

What the hell are they waiting for? Janvert wondered. He recalled a reference by Peruge to "silent women." The excuse had been that they were studying a difficult accent. The old bitch did not look like an actress, though. Her eyes remained bright and alert, but there was pure patience in the set of her shoulders, the way she held the swinging door open.

We must risk it, Hellstrom thought.

He broke the silence then. "Mrs. Niles, would you bring us two servings, please, just for Fancy and me. Mr. Janvert is not eating." At the same time, masking the action by scratching his head, Hellstrom signaled for her to proceed. The words would be nonsense sounds to "Mrs. Niles," who was a nonfertile worker trained specially for

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this job. She read his hand signs, however, nodded and retreated into the kitchen.

JANVERT grew aware of appetizing smells from the kitchen, began to wonder if he had acted foolishly. Would these people dare try to poison him here? They were weirdos, certainly, but— Yes, they might try to poison him. The elaborate luncheon confused him, though. Hellstrom surely must have known about Peruge's death. Who else could have ordered that? Whom had they been expecting for this meal, then—or had they prepared this luncheon as an elaborate sham? That might mean they had prepared nothing but straightforward, wholesome food.

He loved pork chops.

Hellstrom was staring calmly out the window at the other end of the table, his manner casual, unconcerned. "You know, Fancy, I always like it when we eat here. We should do this more often—instead of grabbing a quick lunch on the set."

"Or missing lunch entirely," she said. "Oh, I've noticed how you do sometimes."

He patted his stomach. "Doesn't hurt to miss an occasional meal. I tend to fat anyway."

"I'm going to remind you about this," she said. "You're going to ruin your stomach if you go on the way you've been."

"We have been busy," Hellstrom said.

They were nuts, Janvert thought. Chatting, making small talk at a time like this.

Mrs. Niles backed through the swinging door, turned to reveal a plate in each hand. She hesitated a moment beside Hellstrom, then served the young woman first. When both plates were on the table Hellstrom signaled for her to bring the drinks. He had ordered vat-beer. The Hive made a limited amount of it as a reward for superior work and as a mask to convey some of the adjustment chemicals occasionally required for reject-specialists who were being sent back to dronedom.

Janvert glanced at the plate in front of the woman beside him. Steam was rising from it. The pork had been covered with gravy in which large mushrooms could be seen. Spinach and baked potato had been served beside the meat course and a stiff, white serving of sour cream had been spooned onto the potato. The young woman just sat there, though, hands still folded, eyes downcast. Was she praying, for Christ's sake?

Hellstrom startled him then by placing both hands folded together over his own plate and intoning: "Dear Lord, for this food we are about to eat we give our true and heartfelt thanks. May thy divine grace visit us in this sharing of the substance of life. Amen."

The young woman joined him in the: "Amen."

The wealth of feeling in Hellstrom's voice confused Janvert. And this dame, they way she joined him at the end. They must do this regularly. The ritual shook Janvert more than he liked to admit even to himself—and he responded with anger. More of their damned acting!

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The aroma from the plate beside Janvert added to his frustration. She was reaching for her fork, too. They were going right ahead with the damned meal.

"Are you sure we cannot serve you anything?" Hellstrom asked.

In sudden angry glee Janvert reached past the young woman, took Hellstrom's plate and said, "Certainly. Glad you asked." He placed the plate triumphantly in front of him, taking special delight in the way the captured dish clinked against the service plate. Janvert thought, *There won't be anything wrong with the food Hellstrom was going to eat!*

Hellstrom threw his head back and laughed, unable to restrain himself. He felt that the Hive suddenly had come into a new vitality, that it was being expressed in his own person and was helping him do battle.

SMILING, Mimeca peered up through her long lashes at Hellstrom. Janvert was predictable, but Outsiders often were. He had behaved precisely as Hellstrom had signaled he would. She had harbored doubts when Hellstrom had flashed the plan in Hive-sign. Janvert had the loaded serving in front of him, though, and was picking up knife and fork to eat it. He would be docile enough pretty soon.

Hellstrom wiped laughter tears from his eyes with a corner of his napkin, called out to the kitchen door, "Mrs. Niles! Bring another serving."

The door opened and the older woman peered around its edge.

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Hellstrom pointed to the empty place in front of him, signaled for another serving. She nodded, ducked into the kitchen and reappeared almost immediately with another heaping plate. *Probably her own,* Hellstrom thought. He hoped there was more. The neutered workers had such enjoyment from an occasional break in the common fare of vat gruel. Idly he wondered where these chops had come from—probably that young worker who had been killed in the generator room last night. They looked tender. He thought as he picked up his knife and fork, *Bless this one who joins the eternal flow of life, becoming part of all.*

The meat not only was tender, it was juicy. Janvert was displaying obvious relish.

"Eat hearty," Hellstrom said, gesturing with a fork. "We serve nothing but the very finest food here and Mrs. Niles is a superb cook."

She was, too, Hellstrom reminded himself as he took another savory bite. He hoped again that she had saved at least one serving for herself. She deserved a reward.

XXIII

The words of Trova Hellstrom: The model of the Hive's insertion into those patterns of other life around us is that of the tesseract, a cube projected into four dimensions. Our tesseract is built of mosaic parts which cannot be detached, whose boundaries blend one into another with indissoluble flow. In this way this model gives us a habitat and a timeline remarkably self-contained, but merging into the larger system of the planet and the universe beyond. Remember always that our tesseract merges with other systems—and it does this in such diverse and complex ways that we cannot remain concealed indefinitely. Thus we consider the physical dimensions of our Hive as a habitat for only a particular stage of our development. We will outgrow this stage. It is of the utmost concern for the managing specialists of the Hive, therefore, that we not restrict our genetic lines of adaptability. We are aimed at other times as well as other habitats.

"THAT sounded like an interesting conversation, what I could hear on this end," Clovis Carr said.

Lincoln Kraft stared across his big flat-top desk at her. He could see a corner of Steens Mountain through the window behind her head. The sounds of afternoon shopping were just beginning to pick up in the big commercial complex one floor down. A poster on the wall to his left gave detailed recommendations on how to prevent rustling. Random patrol of fences was the third item down and his gaze kept returning to that number, seeking some magic in it. It was almost three P.M. He had received three telephone calls from the office in Lakeview thus far and each time had been told to "sit tight."

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Clovis Carr squirmed her tiny, wiry body into a more comfortable position on the hard wooden seat of her chair. She was a brunette with a deceptively young face that tended to set into harsh, aging lines when she relaxed. She had been with Kraft since shortly before 11:00 A.M.—first at the motel where Peruge's death had been reported by a tough-looking runt of a man who had identified himself to Kraft only as "Janvert." Kraft had understood almost immediately that Janvert and this Clovis Carr were associates and the pieces had begun to fall into place from there. The pair belonged to Peruge's team. Kraft had played his hand carefully from that point—these two were suspicious of him. he soon realized. The female stuck to him like a burr on a bear.

That third call from Sheriff Lapham in Lakeview had been part of a pattern that had Kraft more nervous than he had been since the summer the Hive had picked up a runaway toddler and an entire family had fanned out over the range around the farm, hunting the lost child. That one had been turned off by a quickly hatched story that a child of the exact description had been seen being picked up by a couple in an old car only a block away from the place where the toddler last had been seen.

Lapham's orders in his final call had been explicit. "You wait in your office until the FBI gets there, you hear, Linc? This is a job for very delicate professional handling. Take my word on it."

Kraft had been at a loss how to respond to this. He could act professionally insulted (and leave a political scar the sheriff would never forget)—or he could obey like a tame public servant. He could act dumb and western hick for this dame—or knowledgeable and sophisticated. He didn't know which response would give him the best leverage to probe and seek a clue to help the Hive. One way these Outsiders might mistakenly underestimate him. He rather doubted this was possible now. Another way he might gain valuable insights from what they did not do.

Such as not leaving him alone.

Kraft's long conditioning to protect the Hive at all costs left him irritated and frustrated now. All his fears were sharpened by the sense of danger, but the need to maintain his cover dominated every response that occurred to him. In the end he did nothing except obey Sheriff Lapham—sit here like a lump waiting for the FBI.

The Carr female annoyed him. As long as she stayed there, watching, listening, he could not call Hellstrom. She knew he was nervous, too, and seemed to enjoy it. As though he couldn't see how phony she was. Vacationer? That one?

She had an oval face with skin badly sunburned, a hard and direct stare from cold gray eyes, a firm jaw and a thin, unsmiling mouth. He suspected she was carrying a pistol in that big black canvas handbag in her lap. Something about her was faintly reminiscent of the models on TV commercials—a controlled and purposeful way of moving, a remoteness of manner no amount of surface glibness could

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conceal. She was one of those tiny women who would be skinny and energetic until the day they died. She was all fitted out for her western vacation—dungaree slacks, matching blouse and brass-button jacket. The clothes still had a sheen of newness about them and looked as though they had been picked by a wardrobe mistress according to a script adviser's list. They didn't suit her style. The blue bandanna over her long black hair was the final unlikely touch. Her left hand held that black canvas purse in the casual-but-ready manner of a policewoman. Every time he looked at the purse Kraft felt more certain she carried a gun in it. Although she had avoided showing Kraft her credentials, Sheriff Lapham had known her name on his first call and had treated it with the kind of deference that spoke of official clout—and highly potent clout at that.

Kraft had just hung up on Lapham's third call.

"That was the sheriff again, wasn't it?" she asked after a while nodding at the telephone on the desk.

HER voice carried an unconcealed note of scorn, Clovis knew, but she had decided not to worry about effects. She did not like this thick-nosed, beetle-browed deputy and the dislike went deeper than her suspicions about his involvement in the deaths of her fellow agents. He was western and he showed an evident liking for outdoor life. Those two items alone would have done it. She preferred the nightclub circuit, just as Eddie Janvert did, and this was a damned hick assignment. The skin of her cheeks and nose felt tight and painful from sunburn, confirming her irritation.

"It was the sheriff," Kraft admitted. Why deny it? His answers had signaled the questions and those questions could have originated only with the sheriff.

No, sir. The FBI hasn't shown up yet.

Yes, sir—I haven't been out of this here office.

Clovis Carr sniffed. "What have they found out about Peruge's murder? Anything yet on the autopsy?"

Kraft studied her for a moment. One closing item from the sheriff had to be weighed carefully. When the special agent in charge of the FBI team arrived the sheriff wanted Kraft to relay a message. The message sounded simple enough. The U.S. Attorney still was not ready to deliver a firm opinion "on the legal basis for intervention." Kraft was to tell the FBI, however, that the agents could proceed on the "presumptive assumption" that Hellstrom's activities in interstate commerce would provide such a basis. According to the sheriff the FBI was due at Fosterville any minute and Lapham wanted to know the minute they arrived. Rented cars had been sent to the airport and "Janvert's people" were there to give a briefing.

Kraft had written "presumptive assumption" on the notepad beside the telephone. He wondered now if it would lull suspicions if he shared this message with the Carr female.

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He knew he would have to deliver it intact to the FBI, but that was another matter. Could any advantage be gained from it now?

"They haven't reported on the autopsy yet," Kraft said.

"You have written 'presumptive assumption' on your notepad," she said. "Is that about the U.S. Attorney's opinion?"

Kraft came to a negative decision about Carr, said, "I'd better let the FBI discuss that with you. Say, you never did tell me what your connection with this is."

"No, I didn't, did I?" she said. "You're a very careful man, Mr. Kraft, aren't you?"

He nodded. "Yes."

What did that mean?

A malicious smile twitched the corners of her mouth. "And you don't like to be kept on the bench here."

"I don't like it," he agreed. He wondered at her almost open hostility toward him. Was it calculated provocation or did it reflect something even more disastrous—a high-up decision to distrust the local deputy? He guessed at the latter, wondered how to deal with it. Hellstrom and the Security Council had discussed with him contingency plans for such a problem, but no one had assumed a situation as complex as this one.

CLOVIS glanced over her shoulder through the window behind her chair. The office was hot and the hard wooden seat of the chair irritated her. She longed for an iced drink and a cool, shadowy lounge bar with soft chairs, Janvert beside her warm and admiring. She had been playing the part of Janvert's sister on this stupid western vacation for a week now. That mask had come off with the discovery of Peruge's death. The cover relationship had been touchy at times. Janvert had not gone out of his way to keep things smooth with Nick Myerlie, who had fronted as their father. And DT had poked his nose in every time she and Janvert turned around. Spying for the brass—no doubt of it. DT was so damned obvious it was ridiculous. Tight quarters in the damned van and an investigation whose pattern none of them liked had worn on all of them. There had been times when they had chosen not to speak rather than risk a fight. All that stored-up temper was coming out in her now with Kraft as its focus. She realized this, but didn't care to suppress it.

Housewives doing their afternoon shopping were beginning to fill the parking lot below the window with their cars. Clovis scanned the cars, hoping to see the FBI team emerge from one of them. Nothing. She returned her attention to Kraft.

I could tell this stupid deputy that we're prepared to put him six feet under in the most direct and sanitary way . . . This was a fantasy game she liked to play about people she disliked. Kraft would be shocked and alarmed, of course. He already showed signs of the twitches. Nobody was going to blast this son of a bitch, of course. Hardly likely. But Kraft was in trouble. The Chief had pulled strings in Washington and these had reached out through the State Capitol to the sheriff in Lakeview.

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It was like a marionette system. Potent federal power was breathing down Kraft's collar and he could feel it. He still wanted to see her identification, but he hadn't asked straight out to see it in more than an hour. Lucky, too—she had only her cover identification and according to it she was Clovis Myerlie and she had already been introduced as Clovis Carr.

"This has been a very unusual way to handle a missing-persons case," she said, swinging around to stare at the poster on the side wall. Cattle rustling, yet, and how to prevent same!

"An even more unusual way to handle an unexplained death in a motel," Kraft said.

"Murder case," she corrected him.

"I haven't seen that tied down yet," he said.

"You will."

He kept his gaze on Carr's sunburned face. They both knew that nothing about this case was usual. The sheriff's words still rankled in Kraft's memory. *Linc, we are just the country cousins in this case as of now. The governor himself is in this act. This is not routine, got that? Not routine. We will straighten this out between us later, but right now, I want you to lay doggo and let the FBI run the whole show. They can fight it out with the Alcohol Tax boys on who has jurisdiction, but our jurisdiction stops at the edge of the governor's desk, got me? Don't tell me we have rights and responsibilities. I know 'em as well as you do. Neither of us is going to mention them. Is that all clear?*

It had been very clear.

"Where did you get that sunburn?" Kraft asked, staring at Carr's face.

Sitting out in your goddamned western sunshine with a pair of binoculars, you son of a bitch! You know where I got it. She shrugged and kept her voice nonchalant. "Oh, just hiking around your lovely countryside."

Hiking around the Hive, Kraft thought with a pang of deep disquiet. He said: "None of this might have happened if your Mr. Peruge had gone through normal channels. He should have gone to the sheriff over in Lakeview first instead of coming to me or even to the state people. Sheriff Lapham's a good—"

"A good politician," she interrupted. "We thought we'd rather deal directly with someone who enjoyed a closer relationship with Dr. Hellstrom."

Kraft licked his lips, his mouth suddenly dry. He held himself watchfully alert for any more revelations that touched on their suspicions. He didn't like the way Carr cocked her head to one side to return his gaze.

"I don't understand," he said. "What have I to—"

"You understand," she said.

"Damned if I do!"

"And damned if you don't," she said.

Kraft felt himself caught by the unleashed power behind her hostility. She was deliberately trying to provoke him. She really didn't care how she treated him. He blurted, "Oh, I know what you are, all right. You're from one of those

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secret government agencies. CIA, I'll bet. You think you own the—"

"Thanks for the promotion," she said, but she bent a more watchful gaze upon him. The conversation had taken an awkward turn she did not like at all. Eddie had said the Chief wanted them to press the deputy, but not to frighten him off.

Kraft fidgeted in his chair. A painful silence settled over the room, deep and charged. He started casting around for excuses to get away to a telephone. He could excuse himself to go to the toilet, but this female would make sure he went to the toilet and there was no telephone there. The desire to call Hellstrom was losing its appeal, too. It could be dangerous to call Hellstrom. Every line to the farm might carry a tap by now. What had caused them to link him with Hellstrom? There had been times he had been taken sick on Outsider foods and been nursed back to health at the Hive. The cover was that he had been a great good friend of old Trova (true) but she was long dead and in the vats. Why should that make these government people suspicious?

His mind went on this way for a time, following the trail of its own fears, worrying out bits of the past to wonder about. Was *that* suspicious, or what about *this* event, or the time he had . . .

THE ringing of the telephone startled him out of this nervous reverie. He grabbed for the phone, knocked it from its cradle, had to recover it from a dangling position beside the desk. The voice on the line was anxious and loud when he finally got the receiver to his ear.

"Hello? Hello?"

"This is Deputy Kraft," he said.

"Is Clovis Carr there? They said she'd be there."

"She's here. Who is this?"

"Just put her on the line."

"This is an official phone and I'd—"

"Goddamn it, this is an official call. You put her on this line."

"Yes, well—"

"Do it now!" There was no mistaking the long history of expected obedience behind that barked command. Kraft felt the power in the voice as an almost palpable thing. He handed the phone across the desk to Carr. "It's for you."

She took the phone from him with a puzzled frown, spoke into it. "Yes?"

"Clovis?"

She recognized that voice—the Chief himself. For the love of all that was holy, the Chief himself was calling here!

"Clovis here," she said, her mouth dry.

"Do you know who this is?"

"Yes."

"I have you identified from a voiceprint being played this instant. I want you to listen very carefully and do exactly what I tell you to do."

"Yes, sir. What is it?" Something in the tone told her it was big trouble.

"Can that deputy hear this?" the Chief asked.

"I doubt it."

"We'll have to chance it. Now get this: that light aircraft with the FBI men and the Alcohol Tax team

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crashed somewhere in the Sisters. That's a mountain north of you. All dead. It could have been an accident, but we are acting on the assumption that it was not. I've just been on to the director, and he is taking the same position, especially in view of what I could tell him about the situation over the telephone. A new FBI team is on its way from Seattle, but it will be some time before they arrive."

She gulped, glanced worriedly at Kraft. The deputy was leaning back, hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"I've been in radio contact with the other members of your team, all except Janvert. Is he still at that farm?"

"As far as I know, sir."

"All right—no help for that. It might even be a plus. The others are coming down from the mountain to pick you up. You are to take the deputy with you. Use force if necessary. Take him with you, got that?"

"I've got it." Her exploring fingers felt the outline of the revolver in her purse. She slipped her hand into the bag, took a firm grip on the gun. Involuntarily her glance went to the big pistol in a holster at Kraft's waist.

"I've instructed DT on what I want done," the Chief said. "You are to move onto that farm and take over there, subdue any opposition. The director concurs. Responsibility will be ours, however. We have been promised extraordinary cooperation by the FBI. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"I hope you do. You are not to take chances. You are to kill that deputy if he interferes. And anyone else who tries to block you. We will work out a sufficient justification for this later. I want that farm in our hands within the hour."

"Yes, sir. Is DT to be in charge."

"No. Until you get to the farm, you are in charge."

"Me?"

"You. When you contact Janvert he is to take over."

Her mouth was dry as dust. God! She needed a drink and comforting, but she sensed why the Chief was putting her in charge until they reached Eddie. The Chief knew about her and Eddie. The Chief had a snake's mind. He'd say to himself: *She's the one with the best motivation. She'll want to rescue her boy friend. Give her the reins...*

She sensed something else might be on the Chief's mind, but she didn't know how to ask. Was it something to do with Kraft? She pressed the phone tightly against her ear, pushed her chair back toward the window.

"Is that all?" she asked.

"No, you'd better know the worst. We stumbled onto something while talking to the sheriff. He gave it to us himself, very casual and unconcerned. It seems your deputy, whenever he gets sick, is in the habit of convalescing at Hellstrom's farm. In our hunt for Hellstrom's Washington connections, we found a Congressman about whom we can say the same thing—and we have our suspicions about at least one Senator. Got that?"

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She nodded. "I see."

"I think you do. This thing spreads wider every time you pry up another layer. Take no chances with that deputy whatsoever."

"I won't," she said. "How bad was it—I mean, at the Sisters?"

"The plane burned. It was a twin Beech, chartered and recently checked out by the FAA. No reason for it to go down. We haven't been able to examine the wreckage yet, but the fire gave it away—started a forest blaze on the east slope, they say. Forest service boys are there now—and local police, FAA. We'll have a report as soon as possible."

"What a mess," she said and noted that Kraft was staring at her intently now, trying to listen. "Is there any chance at all that it was an accident?"

"Possible, but not likely. The pilot was former Air America from Vietnam, six thousand hours. Draw your own conclusions. Oh, tell Shorty he has Class G authorization. Do you know what that is?"

"Yes—yes, sir." *My God! Kill and burn if necessary . . .*

"I'll get back to you by radio after you've taken over that farm," the Chief said. "Within the hour. Goodbye and be thorough."

She heard the receiver click, moved her chair across to the desk, replaced the phone in its cradle. Using the edge of the desk as a cover, she slipped her revolver from the purse.

Kraft watched her, trying to piece together a version of that conversation from the only end he'd heard. His first inkling that things had changed for the worse came when he saw the silencer of Clovis Carr's pistol rise like a steel snake over the far edge of the desk.

Clovis's working personality was in full charge now and she put aside thoughts of Janvert's arms around her or other desirable things.

"Keep your hands where I can see them" she said. "I will kill you at the slightest provocation. Do not make any sudden movements for any reason. Get to your feet carefully, keeping your hands on the desk. Use extreme caution in everything you do, Mr. Kraft. I don't want to shoot you in this office. It would be messy and difficult to explain. But I will do it if you force me."

XXIV

From the preliminary oral report on the autopsy of Dzule Peruge: The bruised area on the arm gave indications of an inept injection with a hypodermic. We cannot say at this time what may have been injected, but the biopsies are not yet completed. Other indications on the cadaver indicate what we call among ourselves a "motel death." The syndrome is rather common with males past the age of thirty-five where death occurs under the circumstances described here. The immediate cause of death was what you would call a massive "heart failure." We'll send along the technical details later. Whether this remains the proximate cause depends on the biopsies. From the other indications we can say the subject

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had engaged in sexual intercourse at a time very close to the time of death—perhaps no more than four hours earlier. Yes, that's what we mean. It's a very clear pattern: older man, younger woman (presumed from your account) and too much sex. All the evidence is consistent with this diagnosis.

"MR. JANVERT, we have some things to discuss," Hellstrom said. He leaned toward Janvert across the table.

Janvert, having finished his lunch, sat with his right elbow on the table, chin resting on his hand. He felt lost in thought, bemused by the whole situation—the present company, the Agency, the call from the Chief, this assignment, his former fears. Vaguely he felt that he still ought to be alert and *perhaps* concerned about Hellstrom and the woman at table with them, but this did not seem worth the effort.

"It's time we discussed our mutual problems," Hellstrom said.

Janvert nodded on his supporting hand, chuckled as his chin started to slip from the hand.

Discuss problems. Certainly . . .

Something about this rustic farm setting, the excellent meal, something about these people at table with him, somewhere in all this was good and sufficient reason for the transformed mood now upon him, Janvert told himself. He had fought long enough against liking Hellstrom. Perhaps it was still unwise to place complete trust in Hellstrom, but it was all right to like him. There was a difference between trust and liking. Hellstrom could not be held responsible for the trapped life of a nobody named Eddie Janvert.

Watching the transformation, Hellstrom thought, *He's taking it quite well . . .* The dosages were relatively large. Janvert's body was now processing numerous identifier chemicals. Very shortly he would be acceptable by any Hive worker as belonging to the Hive. The condition worked two ways—Janvert would respond with an acceptance of the Hive workers, too—any of them. His procreative drive had been suppressed, also much of his critical ability. If the chemical metamorphosis worked he would become quite tractable presently.

Hellstrom signaled to Mimeca to observe the changes.

She smiled. Janvert's odors were becoming quite acceptable, she thought.

It's this farm that's reaching me, Janvert told himself. He moved only his eyes to stare through the window beyond the foot of the table. The golden afternoon appeared warm and inviting. He and Clovis had talked about such a place many times. *Our own place, preferably an old farm. We'll grow a few things, raise some animals. Our kids can help with that when they're old enough.* It was a fantasy they sometimes shared before making love. The poignancy of the exotic and unattainable made the present ever more sweet.

"Are you ready for a little discussion?" Hellstrom asked.

"Sure," Janvert said. He sounded relatively alert, but Hellstrom detected the changes of tone.

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THE subtle chemistry of fellowship was doing its work. It was a dangerous thing because Janvert might walk openly through any area of the Hive now. No worker would challenge him and haul him summarily off to the nearest vat point. But it meant also that Janvert would respond candidly to Hellstrom or any other Hive Security interrogator.

Provided this technique worked well on an Outsider. That remained to be tested.

"Your law is a little late arriving," Hellstrom said. "Shouldn't you call and try to find out why?"

Late? Janvert looked up at the clock behind Hellstrom. Almost 2:00 P.M. Where had the time gone? He seemed to recall chatting with Hellstrom and the woman—Fancy was her name. Sweet little thing. But someone was late.

"Are you sure you haven't made a mistake about the FBI and the others?" Hellstrom asked. "Are they coming?"

"I don't think I've made a mistake," Janvert said. He sounded sad. The sadness brought a small surge of anger and adrenalin. Nobody made mistakes in this business! God, what a lousy way to live. All because he'd stumbled over that damned Agency file. No—that had been only a single step. The trap was far more complex than that.

Eddie Janvert had been conditioned to accept everything the Agency represented. That conditioning had happened much earlier. But without all this he might not have met Clovis. Lovely Clovis. Much prettier than this little Fancy person beside him. He felt that there ought to be other comparisons to make between Clovis and Fancy, too, but these eluded him now. The Agency—Agency—Agency—Agency. It was a bad business. He could sense the leering presence of the hidden oligarchs whose influence could be felt all through the Agency. That was it—the Agency was bad business.

"I was just thinking," Hellstrom said, "that under other circumstances we might have been very close friends."

Friends. Janvert nodded and his head almost slipped from his supporting hand. They were friends. This Hellstrom was really a very nice guy. He served a good meal. And it was sweet the way he said grace before eating.

The idea of friendship with Hellstrom fanned a tiny core of worry in Janvert, though. He began to wonder about his reactions. Old Peruge had said something important way back there somewhere. He'd said Hellstrom and friends had some kind of—some kind of—injection! That was it, an injection. It turned a man into a sex-mad stud, Peruge had said. Eighteen times in one night. Janvert smiled happily to himself. When you thought about it, that was really very friendly. It was much more friendly than the damned Agency where they watched like cats to find out whom you cared for—the way he and Clovis cared for each other—and then used that against you. That's what the Agency did. Friendship with Hellstrom became an easily explained thing with a little reflection. The whole blasted

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Agency had finally become too much for one Eddie Janvert. Wait till he told Clovis about this. Eighteen times in one night—that was *very* friendly.

Mimeca, taking her cue from Hellstrom, touched Janvert's arm. She had a nice, friendly little hand. "I thought the same thing," she said. "We really should be friends."

Janvert straightened jerkily, patted her hand. That was the friendly thing to do. Again he wondered at himself. He felt that he could almost trust this pair. Was that a natural thing? Well, why not? They couldn't have put anything in his food. That was an odd thought, he told himself. He recalled taking Hellstrom's plate. Yes. Hellstrom had relinquished his very own plate of good food. Now—that was friendly. You didn't hide unfriendly things in plain actions. Did you? He stared at the woman beside him, wondering idly why his mind was working at such a crawling pace. Peruge! Something in his food was out of the question. No injection either. He continued to stare at the woman, wondering why he did so. Sex? He was not lusting after this pneumatic little woman with the friendly hands and melting eyes. Maybe Peruge had been wrong. Had Peruge lied? The unfriendly bastard was capable of it.

There could be perfectly natural explanations for this whole thing, Janvert told himself. What could he possibly have against Hellstrom—except what the Agency's position here dictated. And he didn't even know what that was! Project 40. Yes—something about papers. Project 40. But that was Hellstrom's project. It must be friendly. It wasn't like the damned Agency.

Janvert felt a sudden need to move around. He pushed back his chair, almost fell over backward, but the pretty woman helped him recover his balance. He patted her hand. Windows. He wanted to look out. Weaving very little, Janvert guided himself down the length of the table to the bay windows at the end. A short stretch of water with no visible flow could be seen in the creekbed. The faint afternoon breeze swayed the tree shadows on the water and provided an illusion of movement. The silence in the dining room behind him carried a similar illusion. Casually he wondered how his senses reported reality. It was a very friendly scene, friendly place.

There *was* movement.

Why did he have this little niggling worry way down inside? That was the only irritating thing left in this whole situation.

Situation. What situation?

Janvert shook his head from side to side like a wounded animal. Everything was so damned confusing.

SITTING back in his chair, Hellstrom frowned. Hive chemistry was not working on Janvert in quite the way it would have on one of their own. Hive humans remained close enough genetically to the Outsiders for interbreeding. The divergence was only about three hundred years old. Chemical affinity was not surprising. It was to be expected, in fact. But Janvert was not

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responding with full and open friendliness. It was as though he were fighting a deep inner battle. Chemistry was not enough, then. That was to be expected, too. The human was much more than flesh. Some holdout element in Janvert's intellect retained a concept of Hellstrom as threat.

Mimeca had followed Janvert to the window, stood now just behind him. "We really mean you no harm," she murmured.

He nodded. Of course they meant him no harm. What a thought. Janvert put a hand in his jacket pocket, felt the gun there. He recognized it. A gun was an unfriendly thing.

"Why can't we be friends?" Mimeca asked.

Tears began to flow from Janvert's eyes, roll slowly down his cheeks. It was so sad. The gun, this place, Clovis, the Agency, Peruge, everything. So sad. He pulled the gun from his pocket, turned to reveal his tear-stained face, handed the gun to Mimeca. She accepted it, held it awkwardly—one of those awful flesh-destroying Outsider weapons.

"Throw it away," Janvert whispered. "Please, throw that damned thing away."

> *From a news story, Washington, D.C., dateline:* . . .and it was noted that Altman's death was not the first such suicide of a highly placed government official. Washington observers immediately recalled the death on May 22, 1949, of Defense Secretary James Forrestal, who shocked family and associates by leaping from a hospital window.
>
> Altman's death also revived the recurrent Washington rumor that he was in fact the chief of a secret and highly sensitive investigative agency operating under the government's executive arm. One of Altman's senior associates, Joseph Merrivale, issued an angry denial of the rumor, demanding, "Is that bloody gabble still going around?"

ALL in all, it had been a highly successful afternoon in spite of the earlier alarms, Hellstrom told himself. He stood in the barn aerie, staring out the louvered windows to the north. Vehicles were stirring up dust in the distance, but he felt no threat from the Outsiders at the moment. Reports from Washington and the nearby town indicated an easing of pressure.

Janvert had answered all their questions with only the most gentle form of persuasion. It saddened Hellstrom to think about this, comparing it with their previous procedure. So much pain could have been spared the other captives. When you thought about it, this technique was so obvious. Fancy had done the Hive a truly great service.

Saldo walked to Hellstrom with cat-footed grace, said, "Station Six says that dust out there is three heavy vehicles approaching our lower road."

"I think Janvert's law is almost here," Hellstrom said. "Are we ready for them?"

"As ready as we can be. Mimeca

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is down in the farmhouse prepared to play Fancy to the hilt. Injured innocence, the whole thing. She's never even heard of Depeaux, the Agency, a bicycle—nothing."

"Good. Where did you put Janvert?"

"In an empty cell on Level Forty-two. Everything is on Emergency Alert."

With renewed misgivings Hellstrom thought about what that meant. Emergency alert: time lost from essential supportive tasks, workers detailed to man the system that could block off long sections of the access galleries with solidifying liquid mucilage, masses of hyped-up workers arrayed behind secret exits, armed with stunwands and the few Outsider weapons the Hive could muster.

"They're coming on very fast," Saldo said, nodding toward the dust cloud from the approaching vehicles.

"They're late," Hellstrom said. "Something delayed them and they're trying to make up for lost time. Are we all ready to clear out this aerie?"

"I'd better give the word," Saldo said.

"In a moment," Hellstrom said. "We can delay them at the gate. Were you able to reach Linc?"

"Nobody answers his phone. You know, when this is over I think we should provide him with a better Outside cover—a wife, another phone at his home tied to the office line."

"Good idea," Hellstrom said. He pointed toward the window. "Those are big campers. Could they be the ones that were on the mountain?"

"They might—Nils, they are moving much too fast. They're almost at the fence. Maybe we should—"

He broke off in shocked alarm as the first of the big vans crashed through the north gate and swerved aside to block off the flat pillbox of the disguised ventilator outlet. Two figures leaped from the van as it skidded to a stop. One of them carried what appeared to be a black satchel. The other vans roared right past the stopped one, coming straight on for the house and the barn.

"They're attacking us!" Saldo yelled.

A shattering explosion at the ventilator outlet punctuated his warning and was followed immediately by a second, louder explosion. The first truck had been blown onto its side and was burning.

Our own explosives for removing the emergency cover on that ventilator, Hellstrom thought.

There were other blasts now, shots, screams, running people. Two of the attackers spilled from a moving truck, ran crashing through the farmhouse door.

"Nils! Nils!" Saldo was pulling frantically at his arm. "You've got to get out of here."

> *The Wisdom of Harl:* A society that cuts across all conduct Outsiders accept can exist only in a constant state of siege.

MIMECA/FANCY sat in the farmhouse living room waiting for the arrival of Janvert's law when the first explosion rocked

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the building. A piece of metal from the first van ripped through the north wall of the building a foot above her head. It crashed into the opposite wall and stuck there, smoking. Shots, screams, explosions erupted in the yard.

Ducking low, Mimeca sprinted for the kitchen. Mrs. Niles stored a stunwand in there. She crashed through the swinging door, surprised Mrs. Niles using a stunwand to clear the yard between the farmhouse and barn. Mimeca gave the scene only a passing glance. Her own presence to play the part of Fancy was vital to the Hive's survival. She had to save herself. A door behind Mrs. Niles opened onto solidly built old stairs into the original root cellar. Mimeca jerked the door open, thundered down the stairs.

There was a loud crash overhead, shots, breaking glass. She dashed for some fake shelves that concealed a tunnel to the barn, squeezed through. Workers armed with stunwands were pouring toward her from the other end. Mimeca ran panting past them, through the door to the barn basement. The tunnel behind her was already empty of defenders and she could hear the hiss of mucilage filling the area, plugging it.

A short hall stretched in front of Mimeca, open at the far end into a scene which only the Hive-born would recognize as not one of utter confusion. She trotted toward the area. Workers were dashing about—packages were being carried toward the gallery head. A temporary repeater station had been installed against a wall on the left and guard workers were keeping it clear.

As Mimeca entered this area the concealed hatch over the emergency stairs opened above her. Saldo and Hellstrom came dashing down, followed by armed workers. The opening of the hatch amplified the clamor of battle overhead, but the noise died abruptly. One more explosion came, another shot. She heard the brain-resonating humming of many stunwands.

Silence.

Hellstrom saw Mimeca, signaled her to join him, but continued his course toward the temporary repeater station.

A senior observer turned and recognized him, said, "We've accounted for the ones who got this far, but there are still two more down by the fence. They're out of stun-range from this distance. Shall we get them from behind?"

"Wait," Hellstrom said. "Is it safe for us to go back to the aerie?"

"The two by the fence are armed with at least one machine-gun."

"I will go back upstairs," Saldo said. "You wait here. Don't risk yourself, Nils."

"We'll both go," Hellstrom said. He motioned for Saldo to lead the way, spoke to Mimeca. "I'm glad you escaped—Fancy."

She nodded, beginning to recover her breath.

"Wait here," Hellstrom told her. "We may need you yet." He turned, followed Saldo, who waited with armed workers at the stairhead. The abruptness and savagery of the attack still had Hellstrom in a state of shock. They were really into the fire now, really into it.

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THE studio area of the barn presented a scene of remarkably little damage except for a hole blasted in the wall to one side of the north door. Some equipment had been scattered and lay in smashed disarray there. Part of the broken equipment included a small hive of the new guard-bees. The survivors were buzzing around angrily, but were not attacking the Hive's workers, which was a remarkable test of efficiency in the conditioning process. Hellstrom made a note to compliment the directors of that project and to assign additional resources to it.

The studio's main boom had not been damaged. Saldo already was headed for its cage when Hellstrom emerged from the stairwell. Hellstrom swept his gaze around the studio as he followed. Workers' bodies were being removed briskly by scavenger crews. *Casualties, casualties, casualties! Damn those bloody murderers!* Hellstrom felt himself experiencing a pure Hive reaction of violent outrage. He wanted to wave his arm to summon followers and sweep down upon the two remaining attackers, tear them apart with bare hands no matter what the cost. He sensed the matching eagerness of adrenalin-filled workers all around. They would follow him at the slightest gesture. They no longer were camera crews, actors, technicians, specialists in the multiple tasks by which the Hive collected Outsider energy/money. They were infuriated workers, every last one of them.

Hellstrom forced himself to cross calmly to the cage, joining Saldo there. He took a deep, trembling breath as he hopped into the cage. The Hive had never before been under such great threat and never before had it needed such cool thinking from its leader specialists.

"Get a bullhorn," Hellstrom told Saldo as the boom lifted them toward the aerie. "Call to the two remaining attackers that they must surrender or be killed. Try to take them alive."

"If they resist?" It was not Saldo's normal voice, but pure emotion-charged male, primed for attack.

"You must stop hoping that they will resist," Hellstrom said. "They are to be stunned and taken alive if at all possible. See if you can get under them in the Hive with a stun-wand. That might be one way."

The cage wafted them gently to the edge of the loft. Hellstrom stepped out, Saldo right behind him. The aerie baffle was open and excited voices could be heard from inside. "Tell those workers in there to place more reliance on Hive-sign during stress periods," Hellstrom ordered. "It keeps down the hubbub and upset."

"Yes—yes, of course, Nils."

Saldo found himself awed by the cool command Hellstrom displayed. Here was the true mark of a leader specialist—rational assessment overpowering the anger that simmered underneath.

Hellstrom stepped through the short entry to the aerie, barked, "let's have some order in here! Restore that baffle. Is our telephone still open to the Outside?"

The noise subsided immediately. Workers moved to obey. A security

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specialist standing at the end of the curved bench that had supported the repeaters, passed a telephone to Hellstrom.

"Get the equipment back up here," Hellstrom ordered as he took the telephone. "And send an observer down to Project Forty. The observer is not to interfere or interrupt in any way, simply observe. At the first word of a breakthrough this observer is to report directly to me. Is that understood?"

"Understood," Saldo said and moved to obey.

Hellstrom put the telephone to his ear, found it dead. He passed it back to the worker who'd given it to him. "Line's dead. See about restoring it."

The worker took the phone, said, "It was working just a minute ago."

"Whom were you going to call, Nils?"

"I was going to call Washington and try to find out if the time had come to bluff."

XXV

> *From the diary of Trova Hellstrom:* A filled life, good things in their own time, knowledge of constructive service to your fellows and into the vats when you die—that is the meaning of true fellowship: one in life, one in death.

CLOVIS had assigned herself to the first van, overriding Myerlie's objections that it was "no place for a woman." She had told him where he could stuff that and he had slowly smiled, a knowing look behind his eyes.

Then: "I understand, honey. It may be a bloody time at that farmhouse and you don't want to see your little Shorty-baby get it. If he does I'll come back and tell you myself."

So he knows! she had thought.

She had spat in his face, brought up her left hand for a chopping blow as he made to strike her. Others had intervened and DT had cried, "My God! This is no time to fight among ourselves! What are you two doing? Come on—let's get it moving."

At the first opportunity they stopped the lead van, bound Kraft securely, gagged him and dumped him onto the bed in the rear. He objected that they were "going to pay for this—" but a gesture with the gun in Clovis's hand silenced him. He permitted himself to be bound then and lay afterward on the bed, eyes wide open, studying everything he could see.

Clovis sat beside DT, who drove. She watched the passing scenery without really seeing it. So this was how it all ended. The people at that farm would kill Eddie at the first sign of attack. She had had time to think about it now and felt this as a certainty. She would do what any good agent would do. You didn't leave danger behind your back. A red rage built before her eyes—it actually felt as though it were outside her, beckoning her on. She also began to see possible other motives behind the Chief's choice of her as leader of this attack. He had wanted the leader to be in a blind, killing rage.

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It was after four o'clock before they started. A light breeze brushed ripples in the tall yellow rangegrass beside the dirt road. She saw the grass, focused on it, looked ahead and realized they had reached the last turn before the fence. DT was pushing the big van to its limit, roaring up the last mile of road.

"You nervous?" DT asked.

She glanced at the hard, youthful face, still dark with the kind of tan he'd developed in Vietnam. DT wore a green cap whose translucent plastic visor cast dark shadows over his eyes, accenting the small white scar in the shape of an inverted *V* at the bridge of his nose.

"That's a helluva question," she said, raising her voice over the motor's roar.

"Nothing wrong with being nervous before a fight," he said. "I remember one time in Nam—"

"I don't want to hear about your stinking brawl!" she cut him off.

He shrugged, noticed that her face was almost gray. She was taking this hard. Helluva business for a woman. Myerlie had been right. No sense getting into that scrap, though. If she wanted to be the gung-ho Mizz, that was her lookout. Just as long as she knew how to handle the satchel charge. From all reports, she did.

"What do you do when you're not working?" he asked.

"What's it to you, Junior?"

"Christ, you're feisty! I was just making conversation."

"Then make it with yourself."

I'd rather make it with you, baby, he thought. *You've got a nice body.* And he wondered how Shorty enjoyed that. Everybody knew about those, two, of course. A real thing. Bad business in the Agency, not like he and Tymiena—good clean sex. That was why Clovis was taking this so hard, naturally. Shorty was sure as hell going to get it the minute they opened up. And with Shorty dead she'd wind up running this show.

He glanced at her once more out of this new assessment. Did the Agency really trust this woman to run this sort of thing?

"They're not expecting us," he said. "This could be a piece of cake. We'll walk right through the place. How many people you think they have up there? Twenty? Thirty, maybe?"

"It's going to be a gawdawful mess," she snarled. "Now shut up."

KRAFT, listening to them from the rear of the van, felt something akin to pity. They were going to run into a wall of stunwands, every one set to maximum. It was going to be slaughter. He had resigned himself to dying with the pair in this van. What would those two do if they knew how many workers there really were in the Hive? What would they say if they came back and asked him and he told them, *Oh, fifty thousand or so, give or take a couple of hundred.*

Clovis found herself becoming bitterly amused by DT's spate of talk. The nervousness was in him, of course. She had gone beyond that stage to the killing rage the Chief probably wanted. They were close enough to the fence now to be able to see every exterior detail of the squat concrete structure beyond

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the gate. The afternoon light was beginning to draw its long shadows within the valley. She could see no sign of human activity at the farmhouse or that portion of the barn visible from this vantage. She picked up her microphone from the radio under the dash to report this to the following vans, but the instant she hit the transmit button, the monitor telltale began to squeal. Jammed! Someone was jamming their frequency!

She glanced at DT, whose tense side glances at the transmitter told her he, too, understood.

She replaced the microphone on its hook, said, "Park the van between the farmhouse and the pillbox. You take the satchel. We'll both get out your side. Toss the satchel along the wall to the east side of the pillbox. Get to the other side of it and cover me. I'll set the charge. When it's set we run like hell for the edge of that hill beyond there."

"The blast will wreck the van," he objected.

"Better it than us. Start revving her up. We can get more speed than this."

"What about our passenger?"

"He takes his own chances. I hope he gets it good!" She grabbed up the little burpgun from the floor, prepared to release her safety harness. DT wedged an elbow against the satchel charge which had been jammed between his seat and the emergency jump door. "Hit it square in the middle!" Clovis shouted. "It's going to—"

Whatever she had been about to say was drowned in the clattering, screeching turmoil of their crash through the gate. There was no time to say anything more after that.

From the diary of Trova Hellstrom: The nature of our Hive's dependence upon the whole planet must be kept under constant review. This is especially true as regards the food chain and many of our workers do not understand this clearly. They think we can feed upon ourselves eternally. How stupid! Every food chain is based ultimately upon plants. Our independence hangs upon the quality and the quantity of our plants. They must always remain *our* plants, grown *by* us and their production balanced to the diet that provides us with increased health and longevity compared with the wild Outsiders.

"THEY refused to answer our hail," Saldo said. He sounded grimly smug.

Saldo stood beside Hellstrom in the gloomy north end of the aerie while workers behind them completed restoring the chamber to its former efficiency. Only a shadowy louver stood between Hellstrom and the wrecked van just inside the gate. Flames still crackled in the van and around it. Its fuel had caught fire, blazing up with a roar, then exploding to set little spot fires in the surrounding grass. There would be a holocaust down there soon if the workers couldn't get to it.

"I realize that," Hellstrom said.

"What shall be our procedure?"

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Saldo asked with an odd formality. He was trying too hard to be cool, Hellstrom observed.

"Use our guns. Try a few shots around them. See if you can't herd them to the north and away from the fires to give us a chance to extinguish them. Have you already sent the patrols out to watch the lower road from town?"

"Yes. Do you want me to have them swing back and take this pair from behind?"

"No. How are we doing at getting a stunwand below them?"

"They're not in a good position for that. We might hit some of our own people. You know how a hard charge bounces in dirt and rocks."

"Who's in charge of the outer patrol?"

"Ed."

Hellstrom nodded. Ed was a strong personality. He could control the workers if anyone could. They must not, under any circumstances, kill this pair. He felt this with growing certainty. The Hive needed a pair of survivors to question. He had to find out what had prompted this fierce attack. Hellstrom asked if this had been explained to Ed.

"Yes. I told him myself." Saldo sounded puzzled. Hellstrom was acting with a strange reserve.

"Get started having that pair herded," Hellstrom said.

Saldo moved to relay the order, returned in moments.

"Never forget," Hellstrom said, "that the Hive is a flyspeck when compared to existing Outsider forces. We not only need that pair out there for their imformation—but for possible use in a compromise. Has the telephone been restored yet?"

"No. The break is somewhere near town. They must have cut the line."

"Likely."

"Why would they compromise with us?" Saldo asked. "If they can wipe us out—" He broke off, shuddered at the enormity of this thought. He felt a panicky inclination to disband the Hive, scatter the workers, hope for a few survivors to restart. Surely all of them would perish if they stayed here. One atomic bomb—well, ten or twelve atomic bombs and...

Salso began trying to express these fearful ideas to Hellstrom.

"We're not quite ready for that," Hellstrom said. "I have taken the necessary steps if the worst should happen. Our records are ready to be destroyed quickly if we—"

"Our records?"

"You know it would have to be done. I've sent the emergency signal to those who've been our eyes and ears Outside. As of now, they have been cut away from us. They may have to live out their lives now, eating mostly Outsider foods, obeying Outsider laws, accepting brief lives and empty Outsider pleasures as the final price of their service to us. They've always known this might happen. But some of them can survive. Any of them could begin a new Hive. No matter what happens here, Saldo, we are not completely lost."

Saldo closed his eyes, shuddering at the thought of such a prospect.

"Have Janvert restored to a more complete awareness," Hellstrom said. "We may need an envoy."

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Saldo's eyes snapped open. "Envoy? Janvert?"

"Yes—and see why it's taking so long to gather in that last pair. They've obviously been herded out into the range. I can see workers beginning to fight the fires." He stared out. "They'd better be quick about it, too. If we have too much smoke, we could get Outsider fire crews in here." He looked back at the observation stations. "Do we have a phone connection yet?"

"No," one of the observers called.

"Then use radio," Hellstrom said. "Call the District Forest Service office in Lakeview. Tell them we've had a little grass fire here, but our people have it under control. We will not need Outside help."

Saldo turned away to obey his instructions and marveled at the way all the scattered pieces of Hive Security were gathered into Hellstrom's consciousness. Hellstrom had thought about the danger of Outside firefighters—no one else had thought of that. Another observer was calling to Hellstrom as Saldo let himself out of the aerie.

HELLSTROM took the latter call himself, recognizing a Physical Research specialist on the screen. The specialist began talking as soon as Hellstrom came into range of the pickup. "Get your interfering observer out of here, Nils!"

"Has the observer caused trouble in the lab?" Hellstrom asked.

"We are no longer in the lab."

"Where are you?"

"We have taken over the main gallery at Level Fifty—the entire gallery. We must have it cleared for our installation. Your observer insists you told him to stay here."

Hellstrom thought about that gallery—more than a mile long. "Why do you need the entire gallery?" he asked. "We have essential support—"

"Your stupid workers can use the side tunnels," the specialist snarled. "Get this cretin out of here! He is delaying us."

"The entire gallery," Hellstrom said, "is quite a—"

"Your own information made this necessary," the specialist explained in a tone of weary patience. "The Outsider observations which you *so kindly* brought us. The problem is a matter of size. We are going to use the entire gallery. If your observer interferes you will find him in the vats."

The connection was broken with an angry *blap*.

> *From the Hive Manual:* The most powerful socializing force in the universe is mutual dependence. The fact that our key workers eat an additional diet of leader-food should never obscure from them their interdependence with those not chosen for this privilege.

CLOVIS lay in deep shade beneath a madroña copse about five hundred yards southeast of the gate into Hellstrom's farm. She could see swarms of people fighting grass fires up by the fence. Some obviously had guns, not those mysterious humming weapons she had seen knocking some of her team

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flat. There had to be five hundred people up there fighting those fires! Smoke swirled up—she could smell its alkali bitterness.

She held her pistol in her right hand, resting it over her left forearm to steady it. They would come from that direction obviously. DT had worked down to the right behind her with the burpgun. She glanced back, trying to spot him. He'd said to give him ten minutes, then move back. He would cover her.

She thought about the brief battle in the farmyard. She had never expected anything even remotely like that experience. Gawdawful, yes—but not that. Nude men and women carrying odd double-tipped weapons. She could hear the strange crackling hum of the damn things even yet. From the way her team had fallen under that weird barrage she suspected the things were lethal.

A new kind of weapon—that had to be the answer to Project 40. She had expected weapons, but not anything like these.

Why were the people nude?

She had not yet allowed herself to ask what might have happened to Eddie Janvert. Her original guess stood. Dead—and probably by one of those odd weapons. The things had a limited range, however—about one hundred yards, she made it. Bullets from her pistol had the reach on them. The trick was to keep the attackers at a distance and look out for the few with guns.

She glanced at her wristwatch—three minutes before she could move.

God, it was hot. Dust from the grass tickled her nose. She stifled a sneeze. Something moved on the near slope of the hillside above the fence to the left of the gate. She snapped off two shots, reloaded, heard another shot from behind her and a call from DT. He was already in place. Good. To hell with waiting out the full ten minutes. She got to her knees, turned and sprinted out of the tree shadows in a running crouch, not looking back. To cover her was DT's job. The odd humming sound came from the hillside behind her, but there was only a faint tingling sensation along her spine. She wondered if it could be imagination, but fear added new energy to her muscles and she increased her speed.

A shot sounded from her left and ahead—another, another. DT was using the burpgun on singleshot to slow down pursuers. She shifted course slightly to swing her course around the place where the shots originated. She still couldn't see DT, but there was oak tree down there and some cows were running away beyond it with awkward, bounding gaits. She picked an oak to the left of the cows as her target, caught the tree with her left arm as she came to it, swung behind it. Sweat soaked her body and her chest ached with each panting breath. More shots came from DT's position then, but she still couldn't see him. Six nude figures were sprinting down the open rangeland from the valley, each carrying one of those weird double-ended wands. She drew three deep breaths to steady herself, rested her gun hand against the tree and spaced off four aimed shots. Two of

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the sprinters dropped with that jolting sprawl that said they had been hit. The others dove into the grass.

DT came into sight abruptly, dropping from the other tree. He landed cat-footed and running, bore to his left, not looking back, not looking across at Clovis. A good teammate would cover for him and he had now accepted Clovis as a teammate.

She reloaded, watching the grass move where the four survivors of her fusillade had gone to ground. They were crawling, obviously trying to get within range for their weapons. The grass rippled ominously, the movement coming nearer and nearer. She concentrated on gauging distance. At about four hundred feet she lifted the magnum and began shooting. She took her time, spaced the shots carefully. At her third shot a figure lurched into view, toppled backward. Three others arose from the grass, charged, pointing their wands at her. Taking her time—each of the remaining three shots had to count—she sighted on the first figure, a bald woman with face contorted into a fierce grimace. The shot stopped baldie as though she had run into a wall. Her weapon flew through the air as she fell sideways. The others dove for the grass. Clovis used her two remaining shots, putting them into the grass where the attackers had dropped. Without waiting to see the effect she turned and ran, reloading as she went.

"Over here! Over here!"

It was DT calling from another oak to her left. She changed course toward it, guessing he'd called because there were no more trees in the rangeland beyond. It was open grassland down there, cropped close by cattle for at least half a mile. DT caught her arm to help stop her.

"You know, that's weird," he said. "See how the cows have eaten the pasture down below us, but not up toward the farm. It's almost as though the cows avoided that area. The ones I scared away from my first stand up there were real spooky, as though they'd been herded up there by something below us. I don't see a sign of anyone down there, though."

SHE took a moment to catch her breath. Then: "You have any bright ideas how we're going to get out of this?"

"Keep on like we are," he said.

"We've got to get out and report what we've seen," she said.

She looked up at him, but he was keeping his attention on their backtrail.

"I think you got another one of those creeps that dove into the grass," he said. "Only one of them seems to be moving. You ready to make another run?"

"As ready as I'll ever be. You see anything of the one I missed?"

"He's still crawling, but he's gonna run outa grass pretty soon. Let's separate now. You bear a bit to your left until you hit the road, then try to follow it. I'll hold right. The creek should be over there—you can see the line of trees off that way about a mile. We'll give 'em two targets to chase. If I can reach the creek—"

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DT had been scanning the ground toward the farm as he began speaking and, still speaking, turned to look in the direction they would run. Clovis whirled at the startled way DT stopped speaking. She let out an involuntary gasp. A solid line of hairless, nude human figures blocked their escape route. The line stood about five hundred yards below them, beginning far off to their left in the scrub oaks of rising ground there and reaching into the distance at the right, even beyond the trees that marked the creek bank where DT had expected to take cover.

"Jeeee-sus!" DT said.

There must be ten thousand of them, Clovis thought.

"I haven't seen that many gooks since Nam," DT husked. "Jeeeee-sus! It's like we stirred up a whole anthill of 'em."

Clovis nodded, thinking: *That's exactly what we've done.*

The whole thing fell into place: Hellstrom was a front for some kind of weirdo cult. She noted the pale skins. They must live underground. The farm was just a cover. She stifled a hysterical giggle. No, the farm was only a *lid*! She raised her gun, intending to take as many of that ominous advancing line as possible, but a crackling hum from close behind numbed her body and mind. She heard one shot as she toppled, but could not decide whether it was from her gun or DT's.

XXVI

From Nils Hellstrom's diary: The concept of a colony planted directly in the middle of an existing human society is not unique to our group. There have been many secret groups and movements in human history. Gypsies provide a crude analog of our way even today. No, we are not unique in this. But our Hive is as far removed from those others as they are removed from primitive, cave-dwelling humans. We are like the colonial protozoan, *carchesium*, all of us in the Hive attached to a single, branching stem—and that stem concealed in the very ground beneath that other society, which believes itself to be the meek who will inherit the earth. Meek! That word originally meant "*mute and silent.*"

IT HAD been a frantic and confused flight from Baltimore—an hour's layover at O'Hare, then the quick transfer to a chartered flight at Portland and the noisy discomfort of a single engine all the way up the Columbia Gorge. And then, as evening came down, the long haul diagonally across Oregon into the southeastern corner.

Merrivale was in a violent mood when the plane set him down in Lakeview—and it was a mood amplified by the elation that simmered in him.

When he had least expected it, in fact when he had resigned himself to a degrading personal defeat, they had called on him. They—a board whose existence he had known about, but never identified—had chosen Joseph Merrivale as "our

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best hope to salvage something from this mess."

With both Peruge and the Chief dead, whom else did they have? The thought gave him a sense of personal power which, in turn, fed his anger. Who was he to be subjected to such discomfort?

The report passed to him quickly in Portland did little to mollify him. Peruge was exposed as criminally careless—spending the night with a woman like that. While on a job!

The small plane landed in darkness and there was a gray stationwagon with only a driver to greet him. The fact that the driver introduced himself as Waverly Gammel, SAIC (FBI-Special Agent In Charge) renewed the worries Merrivale had managed to keep largely suppressed on the flight and this, too, fed his anger.

They could be throwing me to the wolves, he thought as he got into the car beside the driver. This worry had simmered throughout the long trip from Portland. As darkness passed over the land he had looked down at the occasional winking of lights and thought bitterly that people were going about their ordinary business down there—eating, going to movies, watching television, visiting friends. A comforting, ordinary life, Merrivale often fantasied, should have been his lot. The other side of his fantasy told him, though, that the silent pattern of safety below him depended largely upon his efforts to maintain it. They did not know down there what he was doing for them, the sacrifices he made.

Even following one's orders to the letter didn't help to protect one—the sudden promotion had not changed this. It was a universal law—the Big fed upon the Small and there was always a Bigger to make one Smaller.

SAIC Gammel was a man with a young mien and iron-gray hair. The harshly chiseled planes of his face strongly suggested American Indian ancestry. The eyes were deeply set and shadowy in the light from the car's dash. His voice was deep and revealed a faint twang. Texas?

"Bring me up to date," Merrivale said as Gammel took the car out of the airport parking lot. The FBI man drove with an easy competence and without concern for extending the car's life. They bounced out on a rough track from the airport and turned left onto blacktop.

"You know, of course, that there hasn't been a word from the team you sent to the farm," Gammel said.

"They told me in Portland," Merrivale said, forgetting momentarily to impose his superior British accent, then adding quickly: "Bloody lash-up!"

Gammel stopped for an arterial sign, turned left onto a wider blacktop, waited for a noisy bus to pass him before continuing. "For the moment we agree with your assessment that the Fosterville deputy is untrustworthy and that there may be other questionables both in the sheriff's office and in the community itself. We are trusting no locals."

"What are you doing about the deputy?"

"He was taken along by your people, you know. He hasn't been heard from."

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"What are you telling the local authorities?"

"Spy stuff—hush-hush."

"They're willing to stand aside?"

"Not willing, but they've let discretion overcome their valor. The political suggestions we initiated on high have the general tone of absolute commands at this level."

"Quite. Presumably you've already invested the countryside around the farm."

GAMMEL took his eyes off the road for a moment. *Invested? Oh, yes—occupied.* He said, "We've only brought in eleven men. It must remain at that for the moment. The Oregon highway patrol sent three cars and six men, but we haven't let them fully into the picture. We're mounting a limited operation on the rebuttable presumption that your office's assessment is correct. However, at the slightest sign that you've misjudged the situation we'll be forced to return to our book of rules—understood?"

Rebuttable presumption, Merrivale thought. It was his kind of phrase and he savored it, tucking it away for later personal use in other company. He did not, however, like the implications behind the phrase and he said so.

"Surely," Gammel said, "you understand that we're operating well outside the conventions. That team you sent in there had no legal standing whatsoever. That was an assault force, pure and simple. You guys make up your own rules as you go along. We can't always do that. My instructions are clear. I'm to do everything in my power to help you with a cover story and/or provide reasonable protection for your people as I am able, but—and this is a mighty large but—these instructions hold only for as long as your assessment of the situation is borne out."

Merrivale listened in frozen silence. It looked more and more as though the board had not promoted him, but was throwing him to the wolves. He had been an associate of two people, now dead, whose policies no longer could be defended. The *board* had sent him out here in the field all alone. *You'll get every assistance from the FBI in the field. If it is consistent with policy other backup will be sent along as you request it.*

Gobbledygook!

He was one clear target if things went more sour. As though that were possible! He could almost hear the reorganization gears grinding back in Baltimore and Washington. They would say, *Well, you knew what kind of a business this was when you got into it, Merrivale.* They would appear professionally sorrowful while they brought up that standard phrase always used for such occasions: *In this business, you take your lumps when that's required of you.*

That was the situation. No doubt of it. If it could be salvaged he would salvage it—but first he had to save himself. "Bloody hell," he muttered and meant every syllable. "Let's have the rest of it. What have you managed to learn about my people?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing, hey?" Merrivale was outraged. He turned, studied Gam-

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mel's face in the lights of an oncoming car. The FBI man held his features immobile, a dark piece of stone for all the emotion showing.

"I would like that 'nothing' explained—provided you're able to explain it," Merrivale said, his tone distant and acid.

"As per our instructions," Gammel said, "we have been waiting for you."

Just following orders, Merrivale thought.

He could see the implications. There was going to be only one responsible target in this situation. That was in Gammel's orders, too. No doubt of it. No bloody doubt of it.

"I find this almost inconceivable," Merrivale said. He turned, looked out at the darkness flashing with vague movements on his right as the car sped toward Fosterville. He could make out that they were passing through open countryside, the road climbing slightly—hills made dim shapes ahead in starlight. Few other cars shared the road. The dark landscape carried a sense of loneliness that rubbed at Merrivale's feelings of abandonment.

"Let's not misunderstand each other," Gammel said. "I came out here alone to pick you up just so we could talk openly." Gammel glanced at Merrivale. The poor sod was in the jaws of the vise, no mistaking that. Was he just now becoming aware of it?

"Then why aren't you talking openly?" Merrivale demanded.

He's more on the attack than the situation really requires, Gammel thought. *Does that mean he has information that might throw his Agency's position into doubt? I wonder . . .*

"I'm doing my best within my instructions," Gammel said. "I had less than an hour at Fosterville before they signaled that you'd be coming in at Lakeview. I had to rush like hell to get there. They said you were coming in at Lakeview because it had the nearest field with lights. Was that it—or was there another reason?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm still wondering about our own casualties—up at The Sisters."

"Oh—yes, of course. That was in the report I had at Portland. There's still nothing conclusive or I'd have mentioned it earlier. The fire played bloody hob with the wreckage. It could have been lightning and a fuel explosion. They said the pilot should have gone up through the Columbia Gorge, but he was trying to save time by flying direct."

"They haven't ruled out sabotage?"

"They have not. High probability if you ask me. Damn stupid kind of coincidence, don't you think?"

"We're acting on that assumption," Gammel said.

"What've you done with your eleven men and the highway patrol?" Merrivale asked.

"I've dispatched three cars—two men each. One of the OHP cars with three officers was sent around to the south. That's going to take a little time. For part of that trip they will be out of range of the radio relay equipment."

"But what are these three cars doing?"

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"We've set up a communications base in the motel at Fosterville. The cars are maintaining contact with that base at regular intervals. My cars are deployed between Fosterville and the farm and they—"

"Two cars between town and the farm?"

"No, three cars. The OHP car is a fourth. My three cars are deployed in a wide surveillance pattern—one on a Forest Service road to the east and the other two spaced along the actual road to the farm. They were instructed to approach no closer than two miles."

"Two miles?"

"Correct—and they were told to stay in their cars."

"But two miles—"

"When we're fairly certain of what we're doing and what we're up against we don't mind taking risks," Gammel said. "But this case appears to be nothing but uncertainties." He spoke in a level voice, trying to hold his temper. Merrivale's carping was becoming insufferable. Didn't he realize he might be wearing Gammel's own handcuffs before another twenty-four hours was out? They might have to arrest Merrivale just to save the FBI's neck. What did this bastard expect?

"But two—"

"You've lost how many people in there?" Gammel demanded, not trying to hide his anger now. "Twelve? Fourteen? I'm told there were nine people in that team you sent in today and you lost at least one team before that. Do you take us for morons?"

"Fourteen, counting Dzule Perruge," Merrivale said. "Your ability to count is unimpaired." In the dim green light of the dash, he noted a muscle working along Gammel's jaw, the tense-knuckled way the man gripped the wheel as he drove.

"So we have one certainly dead, thirteen missing and our own planeload down in The Sisters—that's twenty in all. You dare ask me why I haven't sent my people in there after yours? If I had my way we'd have a regiment of marines on hand—but I don't have my way. Why don't I? Because this whole thing smells of a lashup by your people. And if it explodes we're not going to get burned in the blast. Is that clear enough for you? Is that open enough?"

"Bloody pack of cowards," Merrivale muttered.

GAMMEL suddenly swerved the car off the road, skidded to a stop in gravel, set the handbrake with an angry rasping of its latch, turned off the lights and the motor. He whirled on the seat to face Merrivale. "Look, you! I understand the hot seat you're on—at least I have a good idea of the bind you're in. But my agency has not been in this from the first, although it should have been! Now—if that turns out to be a nest of Commies up there we'll mop it up and have all the help we need. If it turns out to be an arm of a major industry in this country trying to protect a new invention from the vultures you represent—that is an entirely different ballgame."

"What do you mean? Industry—new invention?"

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"You know damned well what I mean! We didn't sit around on our tails accepting you people as our only sources of information."

Merrivale wondered, *If they have the whole story why are they still helping us?*

As though he had heard the question Gammel said, "Our position in this is to try to keep the crud from hitting the fan. You rub dirt on your outfit and you rub dirt on the whole government. If you've been sent out here as a patsy I can sympathize. But there's no sense in our fighting each other. If this thing's ready to blow and you're here to take the rap you'd better level with me right now. Are you?"

Taken aback by Gammel's sudden stop and attack, Merrivale sputtered a moment. Then: "Now, see here! If you—"

"Are you here to take the rap?"

"Of course not."

"Bull." Gammel shook his head. "You think we don't have our own suspicions about why your boss took the short road to hell?"

"The short road to—"

"Jumped out of that damned window! Are you their patsy?"

"I was sent here with the understanding that you would provide full cooperation until we could field new teams," Merrivale said, speaking stiffly. "I don't find your present attitude cooperative in the least."

Still not mollified, Gammel said, "Tell me, yes or no—do you have new information that dramatically alters your original assessment?"

"Of course not."

"Nothing new to tell me?"

"I will not be cross-examined by you," Merrivale protested. "You know as much about this situation as I do. More. You've at least been on the scene."

"I hope you're telling the truth," Gammel said. "If you aren't—I personally will supervise whatever action we have to take to fry you." He turned, restarted the car, eased back onto the highway. He turned on his lights as he moved and they startled a big black-and-white cow that had wandered onto the berm. It galloped ahead of them for several hundred feet before diving into the open grassland beside the road.

Considerably subdued and now frightened at the position he might be in if he had no cooperation at all from the FBI, Merrivale said, "I'm truly sorry if I've offended you. You can imagine I've been under somewhat of a strain. First the Chief's death and then the orders to take over here personally. No sleep really since this all started."

"Have you eaten?"

"On the plane from Chicago."

"We can get you something at our headquarters in the motel." Gammel reached for the small microphone under the dash, said, "I'll have them lay on coffee and sandwiches. What would you—"

"No need for that," Merrivale said, feeling somewhat better. Gammel obviously was trying to get back on a friendly footing. That made sense. Merrivale cleared his throat. "What sort of an action plan have you devised?"

"We do only a minimum in the dark. We wait for morning and reconnoiter in daylight and under constant radio contact with base.

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That's clearly indicated until we find out what the hell has happened. We can't trust the local law. I've even been told to play it cool with the OHP. Our primary concern is to clarify some of this water that's been badly muddied up to now."

Muddied by our people, of course, Merrivale thought. The FBI people were still a bunch of bloody snobs. He said, "Nothing more tonight?"

"It didn't strike me as advisable to run any more risks than absolutely necessary. We'll have more muscle by morning."

Merrivale brightened. "More people?"

"Two marine choppers coming up from San Francisco."

"You ordered them?"

"We're still covering for you," Gammel said. He turned, grinned. "They are for surveillance and/or transportation only. We stretched our good-will account considerably to get them with no better explanation than we could give at the time."

"Very well," Merrivale said. "Portland told me you had no telephone contact with the farm. Is that situation the same?"

"The line's out," Gammel said. "Probably cut by your people when they went in. We'll have a repair crew out in the morning. Our own people, of course."

"I see. Then I concur with your field decisions, subject, naturally, to review when we reach your headquarters. They may have more recent information."

"They'd have called me," Gammel said. He tapped the radio under the dash, thinking: *They've sent a stuffed shirt. He's a patsy for sure and the poor bastard may not even know it.*

XXVII

From the Hive Manual: As a biological mechanism, human reproduction is not terribly efficient. When compared to insects, humans appear grossly inefficient. The insect and all the lower life forms are dedicated to species survival. Survival comes through reproduction, through mating. Males and females of all life forms other than man are drawn together in the direct and singular interest of reproduction. For the wild forms of humankind, however, unless the setting is right, the perfume is right, the music is sweet—and unless at least one partner feels loved (a singularly unstable concept) by the other, the reproductive act may never occur. We of the Hive are dedicated, therefore, to freeing our workers from the concept of romance. The act of procreation must occr as simply, as naturally and obliviously as eating. Beauty, romance, or love must not figure in Hive reproduction, but only the demands of survival.

THE night-shrouded countryside around the farm now appeared asleep to Hellstrom as he scanned it from the aerie. Darkness blotted out the familiar landscape and only a distant glimmer of light on the dim horizon indicated

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Fosterville. The Hive beneath him had never felt more silent, more charged with the tensions of waiting. Although the Oral Tradition spoke of early confrontations during which the whole Colony Movement (as it was called then) faced extinction, the Hive had never faced a greater crisis. The present events had come about in such natural stages that Hellstrom, looking back, experienced a sense of the inevitable. The Hive's population of almost 50,000 workers depended for their continued existence upon decisions he and his aides made during the next few hours.

He glanced over his shoulder at the swampfire glow of cathodes, the screens that watched over the Outsiders who had come up from Fosterville just after dark. Three unmarked cars were parked out there in the rangeland now, little more than two miles away. A fourth car, identified as belonging to the highway patrol, had been with them at first, but was now laboring its way around to the south of the valley. The only track open to it there was the old Thimble Mine road and that led no closer to the farm than ten miles—from there it would have to cross open country. Hellstrom suspected the vehicle might have four-wheel drive, but the character of the land to the south was such that the OHP car could not get closer than three miles from the Hive's perimeter at best.

The aerie's workers, sensing the weight of decisions on Hellstrom, had lowered their voices and moved softly.

Should I use Janvert as a mediator?

But mediation should begin from a position of strength and the Hive had only a bluff. The secret of the stunwand might be something valuable to offer. Janvert had seen it in action. He would know, too, about the Hive's mastery of human chemistry. He had his own reactions to verify that. But Janvert could only become the Hive's enemy if he went out as an envoy. He had seen too much of the Hive even to consider neutrality.

Hellstrom glanced at the clock behind the arc of surveillance instruments—11:29 P.M. It was almost tomorrow—and the morning was certain to bring a showdown. He could sense that in many things, including the watchful waiting of the three cars parked between the Hive and Fosterville. Thinking about the occupants of those cars Hellstrom felt a need to know what they were doing now. He returned to the observer station, asked a coordinating specialist, whose face looked deathly pale in the green gloom.

"The men are remaining inside the cars," the specialist said. "Their reporting schedules are staggered but about ten minutes apart for any given car. We are confident now that there are no more than two Outsiders in each car."

Waiting for daylight, Hellstrom realized. He said as much.

"That's the general opinion here," the specialist said. "That middle car is only about twenty-five yards from one of the hidden exits, the one at the end of the gallery on Level Two."

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"You're suggesting we try to bring in the Outsiders?"

"It would give us answers to some questions."

"It also might ignite a general attack. I think we've pushed our luck as far as it will go." Hellstrom rubbed the back of his neck. He felt worn out, running on nerve. "What about the car that's going around to the south?"

"It's stuck about where the old mine road starts to cross Muddy Bottom, distance about eight miles from our perimeter and at least twelve miles from the valley."

"Thank you." Hellstrom turned away.

The aerie was quieter now than it had been when he had arrived two hours before. Groups of Security specialists had been passing through then, being briefed for nightsweep. All had faded away into the outside darkness now, were nothing but signal points on the aerie's instruments, glowing figures on the screens.

For perhaps the tenth time since taking up station in the aerie, Hellstrom thought, *I should rest. I'll need all my alertness by daylight. They will come upon us in the morning—I more than anyone should be ready for them. Many of us probably will die tomorrow. Perhaps I can save some if I'm alert.*

He thought sadly of Lincoln Kraft, whose charred body (hardly enough left to bother taking to the vats) had been removed from the wreckage of one of the attackers' vans. Kraft's death made the day's loss thirty-one.

Just a beginning.

Again Hellstrom thought about the three prisoners—it seemed strange for the Hive to be holding prisoners. Outsider adults seemed naturally to belong to the vats. Only very small children had been considered truly worthy of being reshaped for the Hive's uses. Now there were new possibilities.

JANVERT, the most puzzling of the three, had a background in law, Hellstrom had learned through careful questioning. Janvert might be ridiculously easy to wean from Outside ways, provided he could be sufficiently tempered to Hive chemistry. The female, Clovis Carr, was a carrier of aggressive characteristics the Hive might turn to its advantage. The third one, whose identification papers said he was one Daniel Thomas Alden, carried himself like a soldier. There could be valuable characteristics in all of them—but Janvert remained the most interesting. He was small, too, which was desirable in the Hive.

Hellstrom turned back to the observer stations, bent low over one worker to ask quietly, "What about our patrol in the creekbottom? Has it anything new to report on the conversation from that car under surveillance?"

"The Outsiders are still puzzled, Nils. They call this a 'very strange case' and they refer occasionally to someone named Gammel, who apparently believes the 'case' is a snafu. What's a snafu?"

"A foulup," Hellstrom translated. "It's military slang: Situation Normal All Fouled Up."

"Something that has gone wrong, then."

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"Yes. Tell me if you hear anything new."

Hellstrom straightened, thought of calling Saldo. The younger man had been sent to keep a discreet observation on Project 40, working from one end of the long gallery at Level Fifty. It was not a good vantage point, because the major work was being conducted toward the middle of the gallery, at least half a mile from the end, but the Researchers had shown increasing irrascibility after the earlier incident with an 'inferfering observer.' Hellstrom was counting on Saldo's intelligence to manage the situation. It was a matter of desperate urgency for him to know instantly if the situation in the lab changed.

We could never get away with a bluff against the Outsiders, Hellstrom told himself. The Hive might gain a little time for itself, might be able to parlay the stun-wands into a temporary belief in a more potent weapon built on the same principle. But the Outsiders would need a demonstration. And there was always Harl's warning to consider. The threat to use an absolute weapon put the trigger in the hands of an opponent who might say, *So use it!* The weapon must be applicable at less than absolute energies and that fact must be demonstrable, unmistakably demonstrable. The Outsiders had a saying that fitted the situation aptly: *Don't kid the kidders.* A bluff would not work for long. It would be called—and then what?

The wild Outsiders were truly strange. They tended not to believe in violence until it was inflicted upon them. They had a saying about this, too: *It can't happen here.*

Perhaps this was inevitable in a world that based its societies on threat, violence and illusions of absolute power. How could people such as Janvert be expected to think in more malleable terms, to think of life dependencies and the interlocked relationships of living systems, to think of inserting the human species into the great circle of life? Such concepts would be gibberish to Outsiders, even those who spoke for the new fad known as Ecology.

From Joseph Merrivale's private notes: As per the instructions handed to me at JFK Airport, I arrived late Sunday in Lakeview to establish preliminary liaison with SAIC-FBI Waverly Gammel, who had set up a base in Fosterville. He took me to Fosterville where we arrived at 2318 hours. Gammel reported having taken no action except minimal surveillance of target area from distance of approximately two hours and involving only four vehicles with nine men. According to Gammel, this was in compliance with his instructions, a statement that does not accord with what I was led to believe at the action briefing. Gammel reports no word from any of our teams that entered the target area earlier. Gammel evinces doubts that this case involves narcotics. He has seen the preliminary report on Peruge's autopsy. I must protest my dependence upon another

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agency for the manpower to prosecute this case. Divided authority is producing a situation fraught with potential embarrassments and inconveniences. The loose working agreement under which I must perform my duties can only exacerbate present difficulties. Since many actions have already been taken in the field on this case without my knowledge or agreement I must lodge my formal protest at the earliest opportunity. My capacity in the present contratemps bodes ill for our responsibilities. I must make it clear that none of the conduct in this case has accorded with my own understandings of the decisions required to resolve the situation.

SALDO made record time coming up from the Hive's 5,000-foot level where the Researchers had moved their operations. There were fast elevators only in the so-called New Galleries below 3,100 feet, but even these became progressively slower the higher he went. The New Galleries work delayed him slightly at 3,800 feet, but he bulled his way through, making a note to ask Hellstrom if that work could not be put on minimum standby during the present crisis.

He had left a young assistant seated at the southeast end of the long gallery of the relocated lab with a secret weapon Saldo had commandeered—those binoculars once used by the Outsider, Depeaux. The binoculars revealed a spate of activity by the Researchers—this Saldo interpreted as readiness for a test of the system. He dared not approach the specialists, though. Hellstrom's orders had been explicit on that score. Only Hellstrom might change that now and, knowing the urgency, Saldo went to argue for a small interruption of the lab work.

It was almost midnight when the boom cage deposited him on the catwalk outside the aerie. A guardworker there passed him with only a casual glance of recognition. The inner room was dim and oddly hushed to him as he passed through the baffle. He saw that most of the Hive's leadership cadre had taken over the night duty with Hellstrom, who stood at the room's north end, a blocky figure against the dark outline of the louvered window. Saldo found he did not have the highest regard for the leadership qualities of more of those present, excepting Hellstrom—and sometimes not excepting Hellstrom himself. Some of these workers should be conserving their strength for the morrow. He knew this inner reaction reflected a pattern which had been bred and conditioned into him, but the knowledge subtracted little from his assessment of his own personal qualifications Hellstrom should be resting now—as should at least half those present.

Hellstrom turned as Saldo made his way through the green gloom. He asked, "Is there something to report?"

Saldo moved close to Hellstrom and, speaking in a low voice, explained why he had left the lab.

"Are you sure they're about to test it?"

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"It looks that way. They've been stringing the power cables for several hours. I noted before that they didn't bother with the power cables on the other models until they were about to test."

"How soon?"

"That's difficult to say."

Hellstrom moved back and forth a few paces restlessly, fatigue visible in the controlled precision of his actions. He stopped in front of Saldo. "I don't see how they could be testing it this soon." He rubbed his chin. "They said the new model would have to use the entire gallery."

"They are using the gallery, all of it—and fans. And they are connecting a strange construction of pipes down the entire length of the gallery. They're supporting the pipe on anything they can collect—chairs, benches . . . It's a very strange thing they're building. They even took a heavy-duty pump from Level Forty-Two Hydroponics. They just went right in, disconnected it and took it. The Hydroponics manager was upset, as you can imagine, but they merely said you had authorized it. Is that true?"

"In essence," Hellstrom said.

"Nils, do you think it likely they'd behave this way unless they were about to test and were reasonably sure of success."

Privately Hellstrom agreed with Saldo, but there were other considerations—and he had not yet dared to let himself hope. The specialists' behavior might be a reflection of the upset that had spread throughout the Hive. Hellstrom did not think this likely, but it was possible.

"Shouldn't you go down and make a personal inquiry?" Saldo asked.

Hellstrom sympathized with Saldo's impatience. It was shared by many in the Hive. Was anything to be served by going down there now himself, though? The specialists might not tell him anything. They were naturally wary of predicting the outcome of any project. They spoke of probabilities when they did speak—or of "possible consequences in certain lines of development." This was understandable. Experiments had been known to turn upon the experimenters. An earlier test model in Project 40 had created an explosive plasma bubble that had killed fifty-three workers, including four Researchers, and had spread havoc two hundred feet in a side gallery at Level Thirty-Nine.

"What power-drain figures did they give Generation?" Hellstrom asked. "How much diversion do they require?"

"The Generation specialists asked, but were told the computation is not complete. I've posted another observer in Generation, however. Surely the Researchers must at least ask for the diversion."

"Will Generation make an estimate based on the size of the power cables being used?"

"As much as five hundred thousand kilowatts. It could be less, though."

"That much?" Hellstrom took a deep breath. "Researchers are different from the rest of us in many ways, Saldo. They were bred for a rather narrow vision, a con-

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centrated attention of the intellect. We should be prepared for the possibility of a disastrous failure."

"A dis—" Saldo fell into stricken silence.

"Prepare to evacuate the area for at least three levels around the test gallery," Hellstrom said. "You are to post yourself in Generation. Tell the managing specialist he is not to connect the power cables until I have given permission. When the Researchers come to make the power arrangments, call me. Ask them then, if you're able, what range and error factor they are estimating for the project. Get the power figures and—at the same time—order the evacuation of the galleries to proceed. We will risk no more workers than necessary."

SALDO stood in subdued awe. He felt depressed, rebounding from his former pride. None of these precautions had entered his mind. He had thought only to argue Hellstrom into one particular course of action. The stratagem of stationing an observer right in Generation with the authority to delay the power hookup, however, filled the demands of Saldo's own plan and did far more.

"Perhaps you'd better send somebody with more imagination and ability to Generation," Saldo said. "Maybe Ed—"

"You are the one I want in Generation," Hellstrom said. "Ed is a seasoned specialist with long experience Outside. He can think like an Outsider, which you cannot. He also has had sufficient tempering, so that he seldom overestimates his own capabilities—or underestimates them. In a word, he is balanced. If we are to survive these next hours, we require this quality above all others. I trust you to carry out my orders carefully and completely. I know you can and will. Now get back to your station."

Saldo's shoulders came up and he looked at Hellstrom's fatigue-lined features. "Nils, I didn't think—"

Hellstrom interrupted in a softer tone. "In part it is my fatigue that is being short and severe with you. This is something you should have taken into consideration. You could have called me on the internal system without leaving your post. A true leader considers many possibilities before acting. If you were ready for leadership you would have thought to conserve my energies as well as your own. You will grow into this ability—and the delay time between your required consideration of many courses and your decision to act correctly will grow shorter and shorter."

"I'm going back to my post at once," Saldo said. He turned, started across the room. As he moved voices were raised at the observer stations. A garble of sound could be heard coming over one of the communicators. An observer could be heard asking, "Who else is there to take charge?" Another garble of sound erupted from the communicators. "One at a time!" the observer shouted. Then: "Tell them to hold their stations. If too many of us are running around without coordination we'll just get in each other's way. We'll take charge of the search from here."

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The observer, a young female subleader-in-training, whose face appeared an oval mask of shock in the light from her screen, lifted herself half out of her chair to peer across the bank of instruments at Hellstrom. "One of the captives has escaped into the Hive!"

Hellstrom was at her side as soon as he could get there. Saldo hesitated at the door.

"Which one?" Hellstrom demanded, bending over the observer.

"The one called Janvert. Shall we dispatch workers to—"

"No."

Saldo spoke from the door. "Nils, should I—"

"Get to your station!" Hellstrom called, not moving his gaze from the screen in front of the young observer. A frightened guardworker appeared on her screen, a young male with the shoulder mark of dronedom. "Which level?" Hellstrom demanded.

"Forty-two," the worker in the screen said. "And he has a stunwand. He killed two workers, the ones who said they were sent to—to—at your orders to—"

"I understand," Hellstrom interrupted. And he thought, *The specialists I sent down to bring Janvert to sufficient alertness for use as an envoy.* Something had gone wrong and Janvert had escaped. Hellstrom straightened, swept his gaze over the workers around him in the aerie. "Awaken your replacements. Janvert has been Hive-marked. No common worker would recognize him as an Outsider. He can move anywhere in the Hive without attracting attention. We have a double problem. We must recapture him and we must not upset the Hive any more than has already been done. Make that clear to every searcher. Send your replacements after Janvert with a physical description. Issue Outsider guns to at least one worker in each search party as long as the guns last. I don't want stunwands used in the Hive under these circumstances."

"You want him dead and in the vats then," a worker behind Hellstrom said.

"No, I do not."

"But you said—"

"One gun, one stunwand with each party," Hellstrom said. "The gun is to wound him in the legs only if nothing else can be done to stop him. I want him taken alive. Do you all understand that? We need this Outsider alive."

XXVIII

> *From the Hive Manual:* Life must take life for the sake of life, but no worker should enter this great wheel of regeneration with any motive other than the perpetuation of our species. Only in the species are we linked to Infinity and this has a different meaning for the species than it does for the mortal cell.

JANVERT had taken a long time coming to a full realization of the strangeness in his position. For a while he felt he had become two distinctly different people, both of whom he remembered clearly. One of these people had studied law, joined the Agency, loved Clovis Carr and felt himself trapped in

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activities that dehumanized him. The other one seemed to have awakened as a fully recognizable individual while eating a meal with Nils Hellstrom and a rather doll-like woman named Fancy. This other individual had behaved in a wildly detached manner. This individual remembered walking meekly with Hellstrom into a room where people stood around and asked questions. As this weird *other*, Janvert recalled, he had answered those questions with complete candor. He had answered willingly, searching out details that might expand the answers. He had actually worked very hard to make his answers understood.

There were some other strange memories, too—big open tanks in a tremendous room, some bubbling and seething. Another equally large room he recalled as crawling with toddlers, little children who bounced and played in odd silence on a screened floor that surged under them like a trampoline. The smell from that room he recalled as acid, but with a sense of cleanliness about it. He remembered water spurting suddenly from the ceiling onto the toddlers as he passed and then that other smell, the one he recalled from the whole other-Janvert experience and had around him even now. It was fetid, rank and warm in the nostrils.

The self he thought of as his original identity appeared to have been dormant all during the other-Janvert experience—but it was aware now. He recognized where he was in both sets of memories. It was a windowless room with rough gray walls, a depression with a hole centered in it in one corner for relieving himself, a waist-high shelf about one foot by three feet near the room's only door and apparently made of the same material as the walls. A pitcher and glass of black plastic occupied the shelf. They held warm water. There had been a food bowl on the shelf earlier. He recalled that bowl and the blank-faced nude male who had brought it—no conversation in that one at all. There were no windows in the room, just that one door and the toilet-depression. He heard water rushing under the toilet hole occasionally. There were water jets around the depression, too—they had turned on once, cleaning the area. There was no chair, only the floor to sit on and he had been stripped to the skin. He could see nothing in the place that might make a weapon. The plastic water pitcher and glass wouldn't break—he had tried.

His memory presented him with the images of other visitors, too—a pair of older females who had held him with remarkable ease while they examined him intimately, then injected something into his left buttock. The area of the injection still tingled. The return of his original awareness from dormancy had begun soon after that injection, though. He estimated that had been at least three hours ago. They had taken his watch and he felt unsure of time, but guessing at it made him feel he was doing something positive.

I have to escape, he told himself.

His weird other self, lapsing into a dormancy of its own now, brought up memories of hordes of

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nude people swarming in the tunnels through which he had been brought to this place. It was a human ant hill. How could he escape through that mob?"

The door opened and a relatively young woman entered. He glimpsed in the moment she left the door open an older, tougher looking female outside, carrying one of those mysterious weapons that looked like a whip with a double end. The young woman had a stubble of black hair on her head and there was none of that moon-faced vacancy in her features or her movements. She carried in her left hand what appeared to be an ordinary stethoscope.

Janvert leaped to his feet as she entered, moved around near the shelf, his back to the wall.

She seemed amused. "Relax. I'm just here to see how you're taking all this." She clipped the stethoscope around her neck, took up the other end in her left hand.

Janvert groped for the water pitcher without taking his attention from her and his hand knocked the pitcher from the shelf.

"Now, look what you've done," she said, bending to recover it.

As she stooped Janvert brought his right hand down in a vicious chop across her neck. She fell flat and didn't move.

THERE still was the older, tougher looking guard outside. *Relax and think,* Janvert told himself. Cool green light from a recessed cove around the ceiling washed the room, creating a death pallor in the skin of the woman on the floor. He bent over her, tried for a pulse, felt none. Quickly he recovered her stethoscope, listened for a heartbeat. Nothing. The realization that his one frantic blow had killed her filled him with a chill sense of his own perilous position. Moved by a sudden urgency, he dragged the woman's body out of the way to the right of the door, looked back to see if he had left any sign of struggle. The water pitcher still lay there, but Janvert hesitated. The hesitation saved him.

Once more the door opened and the older woman poked her head inside. Janvert, leaping from behind the door, grabbed her head, yanked her into the cell, bringing a knee up into her midriff. She grunted, dropping her weapon and he released her, chopped her as he had the first one, whirled and slammed the door.

Now he had one of their weapons. He recovered the odd whiplike object, examined it. The thing was black plastic, similar in color and texture to the pitcher and water glass. It was about a yard long with a stubby handle indented for fingers. There was a click-notched dial in the handle base and a yellow stud under the indentation for the index finger.

Janvert pointed the double end at the guard he had just knocked down, depressed the stud. The wand went *bap-hummmm* and he released the stud. The humming stopped. The older woman had jerked as the weapon came alive. Now, the skin along her exposed side began to turn a dark reddish purple. He bent, felt for a pulse. Nothing. The two women were dead. He backed away, looked at the door. It opened inward, he

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knew, and there was a cupped indentation at waist height, which he had tried earlier. The door had refused to open then. He wondered now if, in his panic, he had locked himself in here? Desperation moving him, he tried the door. It opened immediately with only a faint click and he glimpsed people thronging past the door before he closed it.

"I have to think," he told himself, speaking aloud.

They would expect him to head for the surface, of course. Could there be other ways of leaving, though? What lay below him? He knew there must be at least one lower level. His captors had led him past an open, doorless double-elevator shaft with bare-bones cars passing upward on one side and downward on the other. He held one of their weapons and he now knew it could kill. Hellstrom's people would search for him. They would move room by room through their tunnel warren and they obviously had the manpower to be thorough.

I'll go down.

He had no idea how far underground he might be. They had brought him on elevators and there had been many floors, but his other self had not thought to count them.

They had fed him something to make him docile, of course. That other self was Hellstrom's creation. It might even be the answer to Project 40. The MIT papers could just be a description of something needed to create the chemicals for manipulating humans.

The searchers wouldn't expect him to go downward, though.

Keep doing the unexpected, he reminded himself.

He still didn't feel in complete command of himself, but he knew he couldn't wait any longer. He held the captive weapon at the ready in his right hand, opened the door, peered out. There was less activity in the tunnel now, but a silent file of naked men and woman crossed in front of him from left to right without a single curious glance. Janvert counted nine in the group. Another longer line was passing in the other direction on the far side of the tunnel. They, too, ignored him.

As they passed, Janvert slipped out of the cell and fell into step at the end of the line going left. He dropped back at the first elevator, waited for a down-car to appear, stepped in quickly, following the example of a lean, blank-faced male. They both faced the front of the car, rode silently downward.

The smell of the place began to repel Janvert more and more as he found himself growing increasingly alert. The man with him in the elevator appeared not to notice it. He breathed easily, but Janvert experienced a faint nausea every time he focused on the smell. Best not to think about it then, he warned himself. His partner in the elevator remained a figure of mysterious menace, but something kept the man from taking special notice of Janvert. The man's pubic hair had been shaved or removed in some other way. His head was shiny in its baldness.

The man leaped out as the elevator passed another floor and Janvert now had the car to himself.

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He counted gray walls and floors, got to ten before wondering how long he should stay with this car. He glanced up at the ceiling. It was as featureless as the floor. Something glistening and gray was stuck to the ceiling near the wall on his left. He reached up, touched the substance. Some of it clung to his finger and he brought it back, sniffed it. The smell was that of the gruel in his food bowl. He rubbed it off on his thigh. The significance of food on the ceiling began to demand his attention. That ceiling might become a floor in the elevator's return phase. The cars never seemed to stop. People leaped on and off them through the doorless openings. Everything spoke of an endless chain of cars circling through the levels of Hellstrom's ant hill

ABRUPTLY the car lurched, tipped slightly to his left. It lurched again, tilted more. Janvert kneeled against the lower edge, crouched there as the elevator turned flat on its side. Nothing but gray wall showed in the door opening as he walked the side around until the former ceiling became the floor, confirming his guess. The car was now going up. He leaped out at the first opening, found not another person in sight. He was in a tunnel illuminated by dim red light, but a brighter yellow glow shone at some distance to his right. The tunnel stretched away into red gloom beyond that glow. He glanced left, found a gentle curve to the tunnel's floor—it bent out of sight to the right. He decided to head for the glow, held himself to a normal walking pace. He had to be just another occupant of this warren going about his normal business. The weapon felt heavy in his right hand, slippery through the perspiration in his palm.

He heard the sound of running water before he reached the area of the glow, but he could see by then that the light came from long slits parallel to the floor and arched ceiling. The slits were at eye height and he had only to turn his head as he passed to look into a wide, low chamber with long tanks spaced through it, water running in them, people working with a business like concentration around the tanks. Janvert peered at the nearest tank, saw fish in it—little fish about six inches long. He saw now that the people farther out in the room were scooping fish from a tank into a wheeled carrier.

A fish farm, by god!

Janvert continued past the glowing slits and discovered another glow ahead of him now, this one with a distinctly pink cast. The light came from floor-to-ceiling doors which revealed a chamber even larger than the earlier one. This area was jammed with waist-high benches, lights low over them, plants with rich green leaves growing lushly from the benches. Again, he heard the sound of running water, but more faintly. Workers wearing dark glasses and carrying bags slung from their shoulders moved among the benches, harvesting red fruit that looked like tomatoes. Filled bags were being carried toward openings in the far wall, dumped through.

He was encountering more

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people in the tunnel now and a humming sound ahead grew louder as he approached it. He realized he had been hearing that sound for some time now but had been filtering it out of his consciousness.

So far none of the people he had met had paid any special attention to him.

He felt that the tunnel was getting warmer as he neared that irritating humming. The sound was almost painful in its intensity. He came presently to larger slits in the tunnel's left hand wall, peered through them into a gigantic chamber. It went down at least two stories, up an equal distance, and was filled with tall tubular objects that dwarfed workers moving on the floor far below him. He estimated that the things were at least fifty feet high and probably a hundred feet in diameter. They were the obvious source of the humming and a noticeable ozone smell was coming through the slits into the tunnel.

Electrical generators. . .

But it was the biggest generator plant he had ever seen. It stretched away at least a half mile to his left and more than that on his right and looked to be at least a half-mile wide. He wondered what was driving those generators.

Janvert answered his own question as he came to the far end of his tunnel. It turned left there with a double ramp. One ramp went down into the lighted room. Another, parallel to and separated from the first by a thin wall, slanted down into a gloomy area where he could discern the oily rush of water passing beneath dim lights.

Water powered the generators. Was it also an escape route?

Janvert turned purposefully toward the water, passed another file of people without a side glance. He emerged onto a black ledge beside the water. It was a damned river! It stretched away from him in the gloom and he could detect moving lights on the far side about a quarter of a mile away.

The ledge beside the river decreased in width as Janvert moved along it below the generator room. He could hear the water under him, the muted humming on his left.

THE possible dimensions of this underground enterprise began to insinuate themselves into Janvert's awareness. It was so large he began to suspect the government must be involved in it somehow. What other answer could there be? It was too big to escape notice. Or—was it?

If the government had a hand in this, why had the Agency known nothing about it? The Chief had been privy to some of the touchiest secrets in the land. Even Merrivale probably would have known about something this big.

In this questioning reverie Janvert almost collided with a gray-haired man who stood in his path at what appeared to be the end of the ledge. A spidery open stairway rose beyond the man. The gray-haired one lifted his right hand, wiggled the fingers oddly in front of Janvert's face.

Janvert shrugged.

The man wiggled his fingers once

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more, shook his head from side to side. He was obviously puzzled.

Janvert lifted the weapon, pointed it at the man.

The other stepped backward, shock apparent on his face. His mouth was open, eyes wide and staring, muscles bunched defensively. Once, more he held up his hand, wiggled his fingers.

"What do you want?" Janvert asked.

It was as though Janvert had struck him. The man took another step backward, stopped at the edge of the spidery stairs. He still didn't answer.

Janvert glanced around. They appeared to be alone on this ledge and he could feel tension mounting. The hand signal obviously was supposed to mean something to him. The fact that it didn't present a new danger. With abrupt decision Janvert flicked the firing stud on his weapon, heard a short *baphum* and the gray-haired man crumpled.

Quickly Janvert dragged the body into the gloom at the edge of the ledge, hesitated. Should he dump the man into the river? There might be people downstream to see it and come looking for an explanation. He decided against it, ascended the stairs.

They ended at a platform that anchored a catwalk across the rushing water. Janvert struck out boldly across the catwalk. He felt no particular qualms at having killed another denizen of Hellstrom's warren. The oily movement of water about thirty feet below him and the continuing pressure of that fetid odor combined to produce a feeling of vertigo, however, and he guided himself with his left hand on the catwalk's rail.

The span entered a short, narrow tunnel at the far side of the river. A glowing yellow tube lit his way from above. A door blocked the inner end of the short tunnel. He saw a wheeled handle at waist height in its center and a green-glowing *A* above the wheel with a stylized symbol beside it. He took the last to represent part of an insect's body, segmented and tapering, but without a head.

Holding the weapon ready, Janvert applied pressure to the wheel with his left hand. It resisted him for a moment, then turned freely to an abrupt stop. He heaved outward on the wheel. The door gave abruptly with a soughing sound and he felt a breeze on the back of his neck. Faintly glowing pink light beyond the door revealed another tunnel. The light came from widely spaced overhead fixtures—small flat disks. The tunnel slanted up at a gentle angle.

Janvert stepped into it, sealed the door behind him with a spin of a duplicate handle on the inside. He began to climb.

XXIX

Hive Security Report—7-A Janvert: Worker whose description agrees with that of Janvert reported seen on Level Forty-eight near Turbine Station Six. Although this would indicate fugitive is going down in the Hive instead of up, matter is being investigated. Workers who reported the sighting say they thought he

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was a Leader specialist because of his long hair and possession of a stunwand. This would tend to confirm the sighting, but it still seems unusual that he would not try to break through immediately to the surface.

JANVERT estimated he had climbed almost three hundred feet in the narrow tunnel before he paused for a rest. The tunnel executed a sharp switchback approximately every thousand paces and he estimated the slope at about three per cent. He guessed that the tunnel was a ventilator of some kind, but he had seen no openings thus far and something about the stillness of the place and the occasional pockets of dust spoke of long disuse. Could it be an emergency exit? Perhaps it had been dug for access while larger tunnels were being excavated. Could it possibly lead to an emergency exit? He didn't dare let himself hope for that yet. The tunnel was just taking him upward.

He resumed his climb presently and in five more switchbacks came to another door with a wheeled handle. He stopped, looked at the door. What was on the other side? Should he pass it? He had a weapon. The weapon carried the deciding argument. He worked the door handle, put a shoulder to the door and thrust it open. Air soughed against his face.

Janvert stepped out of the tunnel onto a narrow, railed platform about halfway up the wall of an immense circular and domed room. It stretched away from him in bright blue-white light for at least two hundred yards. The floor of the giant room curved slightly downward to the center and it was alive with men and women in a complexity of couplings.

Janvert stared at them, frozen in blank astonishment.

Breeding!

He recalled Peruge's astonished account of the night with Fancy. She'd called it *breeding*. That was the only word that really fitted this amazing scene. It excited no prurient interest in him. It even repelled him. The place carried its own distinctive odor—a mixture of perspiration and mustiness, all of it riding on the original stink of this whole warren. He noted now that the floor was damp and it appeared resilient. Its color was blue-gray and it glistened. Through occasional movement at the center of the room he detected a wide circle of darker material that appeared to be a drain—it was grilled, by god! There were marks on some of the flesh to show the grill pattern.

What could be more efficient?

Still in a partial state of shock, Janvert retreated back into the tunnel, sealed the door, resumed his climb. His mind carried the wild image of that room. He didn't think he would ever forget that scene. Nobody would believe him, though. That had to be seen to be believed.

He knew he was working against a background of semihysteria. *So that's what they mean by "sexual congress!"*

He suspected he could have climbed down from his platform and joined the orgy without anyone the wiser. Just another male breeder.

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Janvert passed two more wheel-handled doors before recovering a semblance of mental balance. He looked at each door with revulsion, trying to imagine what he might find on the other side. This was a goddamned human hive! He stopped abruptly, frozen by the full import of that thought.

Hive.

He glanced around at the dimly lighted walls of his tunnel, sensed the faint humming of machinery, the smells, all the signs of teeming life around him.

Hive!

Janvert took three deep, shuddering breaths before resuming his climb. His thoughts were in turmoil. It was a human hive. They lived here the way insects lived. How did insects live? They did things no human wanted to do—some things no human could do. They had drones and workers—and a queen and—they ate to live. They ate things that the human stomach would reject if the human consciousness didn't reject it first. For insects breeding was just—breeding. The more he thought about it the more the pattern fitted. This was no secret government project! This was a horror, an abomination, a thing that needed to be burned out!

> *Hive Security Report—16-A Janvert:* The body of a turbine specialist killed by stunwand has been found near the center of the Primary Watercourse. Janvert's work for sure. Double guard has been ordered on all turbine inlets and screens, although no human could survive a trip through the power system. More likely he's in the old construction access tunnels which were converted to emergency ventilation standby. Search concentrating there.

JANVERT stopped at the next door, pressed an ear to its surface, listening. He heard faint, rhythmic thumpings on the other side—some kind of machine, he guessed. A hiss accompanied the thumps. He released the wheel latch, opened the door a crack and peered out. The room was much smaller than the breeding chamber, but still big. He guessed it to be a hundred feet on a side. The ceiling was low. The only light was a dim red glow from tubes across the ceiling and it revealed stubby benches, each of them with a transparent maze of glass tubing in pillars at both ends. The tubing pulsed with fluids in brilliant glowing colors and this distracted him for a moment from what lay between the pillars on the bench surfaces.

He stared at the objects, unwilling to believe that his eyes were reporting accurately. Each bench carried what appeared to be the stump of a human body from about the waist to the knees. Some were grossly male and some female. Among the females were a few whose abdomens bulged as though they were pregnant. Beyond waist and knees there was nothing that could be thought of as flesh—only that tubing with its pulsing colors. Could they be real?

Janvert slipped into the room, touched the nearest one, a male

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stump. The flesh was warm! He jerked his hand away, felt vomit rising in his throat. He backed against the door to the tunnel, unable to take his gaze from the contents of this room. Those were live stumps of human flesh. They had to be!

Movement in the room's far corner caught his attention. He saw people parading along the benches there, bending, studying the stumps, examining the tubing. It was like a caricature of doctors doing their rounds. Janvert slipped back into the tunnel before he was seen, closed the door and stood there with his forehead pressed against the smooth, cool surface.

Those were human reproductive sections. He could imagine Hellstrom's *hive* keeping those monstrosities alive for breeding purposes. The thought of his own flesh subjected to such indignity sent shudders coursing through him. His back, neck and shoulders trembled and his knees felt incapable of supporting him. Reproductive stumps!

A dull thud sounded somewhere below him. He felt a change in the tunnel's air pressure. Bare feet could be heard slapping the tunnel floor, running.

They're in here after me!

Terror driving him, he jerked open the door, slid through the door shut behind him. The "medical procession" members noticed him this time, but could only jerk upright in surprise before the stun-wand in Janvert's hand sent them tumbling. He plunged through the nightmare room, trying not to look at any of the stumps.

An arched passage went out from the room into a large gallery thronging with people. Terror still hounding him, he whirled left, shouldered through the crowd, pushing people aside, heedless of the disturbance and curiosity he obviously was arousing. Milling turmoil marked his path. There were waving hands behind him, a few inarticulate outcries—one oddly piercing female voice called after him "Say there! Say there!"

At the first elevator entrance he shouldered a man away from the opening, leaped into an upbound car, stared down at faces filled with puzzlement and alarm until the motion of the car closed off the opening.

Two women and a man shared the car with him. One of the women looked like an older version of Fancy, but the younger one had a full head of blond hair, one of the few he'd seen in the depths of Hellstrom's hive. The man was completely hairless and had a narrow, foxy face, brightly alert eyes—his expression reminded Janvert of Merrivale. All three showed obvious curiosity about him and the man bent toward him, sniffing. What he inhaled seemed to puzzle him because he sniffed again, deeper.

In panic, Janvert turned the captured weapon on him, swept its beam across the women. They slumped to the floor as the car passed another opening. A woman with heavy breasts and a round, blank face tried to enter, but Janvert kicked her in the midriff, sent her sprawling into people behind her. The car passed another

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opening without incident, another. Another. He dove out at the fourth opening into another throng of people, plunged through them across the tunnel and into a smaller side passage, which had attracted him because it was unoccupied. Two men he had sent sprawling leaped to their feet and started to give chase, but he dropped them with a burst from his weapon, fled again. He skidded around a corner to the left, another, and found himself back in the main gallery, but at least a hundred yards from where he had left the elevator. A crowd milled there—figures were jammed into the side passage and more were trying to enter it.

Janvert turned right, holding the weapon upright in front of him to conceal it from the people behind, forced himself to assume a slow walking pace while he tried to bring his heaving lungs under control. As he moved he listened carefully for sounds of pursuit. He heard none. The sounds of general disturbance faded and presently he dared to cross the tunnel to his left, leaving it by a smaller right-angle passage that slanted steeply upward. This one opened within a hundred paces into another large cross tunnel with an elevator. He wove his way without incident through passing people, stepped into the first upbound car. The car picked up speed the instant he entered it. He glanced around—he was alone. Openings flashed past him. He counted nine, wondering if Hellstrom had some secret control of this car and had speeded it up to trap him. He didn't dare try to leave.

HIS panic increasing, Janvert moved to the doorway, searching for controls, but there were none. At last the car slowed at an opening. He jumped out, almost collided with two men guiding a long cart piled with what appeared to be yellow fabric thrown loosely into it. They dodged him, grinned and waved, their fingers moving in the same kind of intricate designs he'd seen gray-hair use beside the river. Janvert smiled ruefully, shrugged, and the pair accepted this, continuing to trundle their cart down the tunnel.

Janvert turned away from them, saw that the tunnel ended shortly in a wide arch. Bright lights and machinery were visible in a large room beyond the arch—people were busily working there. He entered, saw metal-shaping machinery on floor stands. He recognized a lathe, a stamping press of some kind (the ceiling had been opened above it to take the machine's upper part) and several drill presses with men and women bent over them, working steadily, ignoring his presence. He caught an underlying smell of oil and the biting acridity of hot metal. The place could have been any large machine shop, except for the nudity of its personnel. Carts carrying bins of metal objects he could not identify were being pushed along several of the aisles between the machines. Janvert tried to appear knowledgeably busy, strode as directly as he could across the room, hoping to find an exit on the far side. He noted that people were paying a different kind of attention to him now and wondered why. One woman actually left a lathe and

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came up to sniff at his elbow. Janvert tried his universal shrug, glanced down to see perspiration glistening on his skin. Had his sweat attracted her?

The far wall showed no opening and he was beginning to feel trapped when a wheeled latch in the wall alerted him. The door was only a faint line in the wall, but it opened outward when he worked the latch. He moved through the doorway as though he had every right there, sealed it behind him. The tunnel sloped up to his right. He listened for sounds to tell him whether others shared the tunnel—he heard nothing and set off upward.

His back and legs ached with fatigue and he wondered how much more of this he could endure. His stomach was a region of painful hollowness—his mouth and throat were dry. Desperation drove him, though, and he knew he would press himself upward until he dropped. He had to escape from this monstrous place.

XXX

From the Hive Manual: Chemical releasers which can evoke an exact predetermined response from the individual of any animal species must be very numerous and may be infinite within the refined nuances of variation. The so-called "rational mind" in the human animal presents no insurmountable obstacle to such a releasing process. It may be considered only as a threshhold to be overcome. And once consciousness has been sufficiently depressed the releaser is freed to do its work. In this area, once considered the exclusive domain of instinct, we of the Hive are sure to develop our greatest unifying forces.

HELLSTROM stood in the aerie beneath a Hive-sign display: USE EVERYTHING—WASTE NOTHING. It was past three A.M. and he had gone beyond wishing he could get a brief sleep. Now he prayed for rest of any kind.

"See those changes in the air pressure," an observer behind him said. "He's into the emergency ventilator system again. How is he doing that? Quick! Send the alarm. Where's the nearest search team?"

"Why aren't we blocking off that system, level by level, or at least every other level?" Hellstrom asked resignedly.

"We only have enough teams to keep a ten-level guard on the system," a male voice to his left said.

Hellstrom peered through the green gloom of the aerie, trying to identify the speaker. Had that been Ed? Was he already back from checking the Outside patrols?

Damn that Janvert! The man was diabolical in his ingenuity. Dead and injured workers, behavior disruptions from the disturbance of his passage, the growing turmoil left in the wake of searchers—everything was conspiring to upset the entire Hive. Janvert was terrified, of course, and the chemistry of his terror was spreading through the Hive. As more and more workers read that subtle signal from a human who seemed one of them

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their unease moved like an outspreading wave. It alone could provoke a crisis.

It had been a mistake not to increase Janvert's guard as he was brought back to normalcy.

My mistake, Hellstrom told himself bitterly.

The chemistry of fellowship was, indeed, a double-edged blade. It cut both ways. Those guarding Janvert had been lulled by it. A worker never attacked his fellows.

Hellstrom listened to the observer stations coordinating this new turn in the search. Their hunt juices were up and he sensed the excitement in their voices. It was almost as though they didn't want to catch Janvert too soon.

Hellstrom sighed. "Get the female captive up here."

Someone in the gloom said, "She's still unconscious."

That was Ed for sure, Hellstrom told himself. He said, "Well, revive her and get her up here."

> *Hive-sign display over the Central Vat Chamber:* IT IS RIGHT AND HOLY THAT WE YIELD UP OUR BODIES WHEN WE DIE, THAT THE COMPOUNDS OF OUR TRANSIENT LIVES ARE NOT LOST TO THAT GREATER FORCE MANIFESTED IN OUR HIVE.

AT THE eighth switchback door on his upward flight Janvert brought himself to a stumbling, panting halt, slumped against the door. He could feel its coolness through his hair as he pressed his head against it, looking down at his bare feet. God, it was hot in the tunnel! And the stink was worse. He felt that he could not move another step without a rest. His heart was pounding and sweat poured from his body. He wondered if he dared venture back into the main tunnels and search for an elevator. He pressed an ear against the door, listened, could hear no special activity on the other side. This worried him. Were they waiting there for him to emerge?

Only faint sounds of machinery and an omnipresent sense of human movement came to him. An odd sense of almost-silence beyond this door, though. Again he pressed an ear against it, heard nothing he could identify as a direct menace.

But there would be more people out there—these weird denizens of Hellstrom's hive. How many were there altogether? Ten thousand? Not a one of them on the census rolls. He knew this. The whole place conveyed a secretive sense of purpose that cut across everything Janvert knew. These people lived by rules that denied everything the outside society believed. Did they have a god in here? He recalled Hellstrom saying grace. Sham! Pure sham!

It was a damned crawling, revolting hive.

> *The last words of Trova Hellstrom:* The defeat of the Outsiders is assured by their arrogance. They defy powers greater than themselves. We in the Hive are the true creatures of reason. We will wait patiently in the manner of the insects and with a logic that perhaps no wild Outsider will

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ever understand, because the insects have taught us that the true winner in the race for survival is the last to finish that race.

JANVERT guessed he had waited five minutes before fear overcame his fatigue. He was not really rested, but he had to go on. He was breathing more easily, but the ache remained in his legs. Pain lanced his side when he took a deep breath and the arches of his feet felt as though knives were cutting them, a consequence of running barefoot. He knew his body could take little more of this driving punishment before collapse. He had to go out there and find an elevator. He straightened, intending to open the door and the corner of his left eye caught a flicker of movement down the tunnel. Pursuers carrying the doublewhip weapon rounded the bend below him, but their weapons were not raised as they climbed and they reacted to sighting him with a brief moment of shock that saved Janvert. His weapon had been held across his left arm as he reached for the door's wheel latch and he had only to press the stud, which his hand did almost of itself. The figures below him collapsed as the *bap-hum* filled the tunnel.

In falling, one of the pursuers raised a pistol and fired a shot that hit a light fixture and sent a searing shard of some shattered material into his cheek. His left hand, clapped reflexively against the wound, came away with the glittering shard and a bright smear of blood.

Janvert had no way of knowing if the weapon in his hand worked through walls, but the deepest panic he had known thus far dictated his next actions. He lifted the weapon, depressed the stud on it and fanned it across the door in front of him before opening it.

Six figures lay in a tangled sprawl beyond the door as it opened and one of them held a nickel-plated .45 automatic with carved ivory grips. Janvert lifted it from relaxed fingers as he stepped into the room. He glanced around, saw what appeared to be a long, narrow barracks with triple-tiered bunks around the walls. The only occupants were the six figures on the floor—all males, all nude, all but one bald and all of them breathing. So the weapon only knocked people out when a solid barrier attenuated its force. Janvert nodded to himself. He had a weapon in each hand now and one of them felt reassuringly familiar.

Hive translation from The Wisdom of the Wild: The path to species extinction begins with the proud belief that in each individual there is a mentalistic being, an ego or personality, spirit, anima, character, soul or mind—and that this separated incarnation is somehow free.

"NOW he has a gun," Hellstrom said. "That's great! That's just great. Is he a superman? Less than half an hour ago he was in the Central Breeder Section. I was assured we had him trapped there and now—now I'm told he has knocked out two entire search teams eight levels higher!"

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Hellstrom sat almost at the middle of the aerie's observation arc, directly behind the observer at the center position. The chair he occupied was his one concession to a body demanding relief from its mounting fatigue. He had been active now for most of twenty-six hours and the aerie clock showed just past four A.M.

"What are your orders?" the observer in front of him asked.

Hellstrom stared at the observer's head outlined against the glowing screen. *My orders?*

"What makes anyone believe my orders have changed?" he asked. "You are to capture him!"

"You still want him alive?"

"More than ever. If he's really this resourceful we need to mingle his blood with ours."

"He's obviously out in the main tunnels again," the observer said.

"Of course. Tell the searchers to concentrate on the elevators. He's had a long climb. He'll be tired. Concentrate every search team in the upper levels along the elevators. Have them scan every car and knock out any doubtfuls. I know—" Hellstrom held up a silencing hand as the observer turned in shocked alarm. "It can't be helped."

"But our own—"

"Better we do it than leave it to him. Look at what he's done. He obviously has his stunwand turned to maximum and doesn't know much about it. He's killing workers close up with it. I feel the same outrage as all of you over this, but we must remember that he is panic-stricken and doesn't know what he's doing."

"He knows enough to stay out of our hands," someone behind Hellstrom muttered.

Hellstrom ignored the sign of discontent, asked, "Where is that female captive? I ordered her brought up here almost an hour ago."

"She had to be revived, Nils. They're bringing her."

"Well, tell them to hurry."

> *From the Hive Manual:* One of our strengths lies in the recognition of the diversity we gain through a unique application of the social behavior of insects as opposed to the social behavior evolved by the wild human animal. With this lesson ever before us we are, for the first time in the long history of life on this planet, designing our own future.

JANVERT stood behind two females and two males in an elevator carrying them upward. The quartet had shown disturbance at his entry and he had interpreted this as growing out of the wound on his cheek. A peremptory gesture with the gun, however, had quieted them, but he was left with the odd feeling that only the gesture, not the gun, had elicited the response. To test this, he tucked the automatic under his right arm when one of the men turned. Janvert waved a palm at the man. It was as though Janvert had said, *Turn around and leave me alone.* The man turned, wiggled his fingers at his companions and all of them ignored Janvert from that point.

He had the hang of the elevators now. You stood to the back in these

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upper-level cars. The act of stepping forward slowed them at a passing floor. There was a critical area near the doorway that operated an invisible sensor.

One of the women glanced back at him presently, nodded at the doorway passing a blank gray wall. *Last stop coming up?* The others moved forward in a body. Janvert readied himself to join them, lifting the captured wand in his left hand. As he moved, the first thin edge of the opening gaped above him. The car slowed and he saw a cluster of bare legs, two weapons pointing in at the elevator car.

Janvert depressed the stud on his own weapon, fanned it across the opening as it deepened. He caught his fellow passengers as well as those outside. He leaped over the passengers, spraying his weapon right and left in a humming arc of destruction, ran down the tunnel to the right, partly on the cold floor, partly on fallen flesh still warm under his feet.

As he ran he heard a gushing crunch behind him, glanced back without breaking stride. One of his fellow passengers had fallen with head across the door opening. The upward surging car had left a head on the floor rolling in a patch of gore.

Janvert turned away, finding it odd that he felt nothing at all about this. Nothing at all. That denizen of this hive had been dead already, killed by one of his own kind's weapons. It made no difference what was done to the body after that. No difference at all.

Continuing to depress the firing stud for short bursts of humming, Janvert trotted down the tunnel, clearing a path as he went. In this way he rounded a bend, caught another group of elevator-watchers. They collapsed as he burst upon them, but a new group was running toward him far down the tunnel ahead and Janvert heard the distant thrumming of their weapons. Obviously they were out of range. He lifted the automatic, emptied it into this group, dodged into the first up-car, rode it two floors before emerging into another tunnel where the opening had been left unguarded.

Janvert dodged hurrying figures to cross this tunnel, entered another sharply slanted upramp, which he abandoned at the first doorway on his right. This led into another hydroponics garden full of harvesters. He recognized tomatoes and hurled the empty automatic at a worker who ran toward him, protesting the intrusion. He ran, firing the captured stunweapon ahead and to both sides. Tomatoes splashed on the floor from tumbling harvest sacks and he spattered their red pulp over his feet and legs as he skidded through them. His chest was one big band of flame, his throat dry and painful, his body almost ready to quit.

A series of small openings became visible in the far wall of the hydroponics room as he approached. They were about chest height and he could see sacked produce whisking upward—then baskets, bins. He recognized berries, what appeared to be deep green cucumbers, stringbeans . . .

A dumbwaiter system!

Shoulders sagging, he came to a

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halt, stared at the wall. He could see no door along its entire length—only these openings with produce whipping upward. There were flat shelves on a conveyor—some of them came past him empty. Containers went onto the shelves. The openings were about three feet square and the moving shelves didn't appear to be much larger. Could he get up in there and onto one of those shelves? They moved upward at a frightening speed. He could hear sounds of tumult growing in the tunnel behind him. What other chance did he have? He couldn't go back.

Janvert summoned a small reserve of strength, backed off several steps and watched for an empty carrier. When it appeared he dove for the opening, rolling himself into a ball around the weapon clutched in his hands. The instant his head entered the opening, the carrier slowed and he landed hard. The shelf swayed under him, but he compressed himself into a fetal ball, managed to stay aboard. His left shoulder rubbed the back wall as the carrier gathered speed and he left a trail of skin before he could jerk away. He peered up and around.

The dumbwaiter system operated in a long slot between gray walls, an area illuminated only by light from the feeder openings. He could make out many carriers moving swiftly upward around him and an acrid fruit smell overrode all the other stenches. He passed more openings, glimpsed a startled face at one—a woman carrying a basket piled high with yellow fruit that looked like tiny pumpkins. Janvert peered up, trying to find out how the system terminated. Did it disgorge into chopping machinery? Was there a bloody mincer arrangement up there—or a sorting system, conveyors?

A WIDE line of light was becoming visible far above him and he could hear the increasing roar of machinery. It drowned out the whistling, clanking, hissing of the conveyor he was riding. The line of light was nearer . . . nearer . . . He tensed himself and was caught by surprise as a trip system tipped his shelf at the top of the lift, dumping him into a bin piled high with yellow carrots.

Clutching the bin's top with his left hand, Janvert righted himself, clambered over the edge into a room of long, waist-high troughs flowing with bubbling pulp of many colors. Workers moved all through the area dumping bins of produce into the troughs.

It was easily six feet to the floor and Janvert landed with a slippery squishing that sent him lurching into a female who had come up to the conveyor outlet with an empty bin on wheels. Janvert's momentum sent her sprawling. He kept her down with a burst from his weapon, charged forward, slipping and skidding. There was pulped tomato on his feet and the floor itself carried a skimming of multicolored debris from the processing, which continued all around him.

He passed another group before reaching a doorway, but their food-spattered appearance differed little from his and they paid no attention to him. Janvert plunged through the

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opening, was hit by a cold shock of water spraying from overhead nozzles. He gasped, splashing through the water, and was almost clean when he emerged on the far side and through another doorway into a wide, dimly lighted tunnel. Water was draining off him, off the captured weapon in his hand. It collected in a puddle under him, but he saw similar puddles all around.

Janvert glanced left—the long vista of a tunnel stretched there, but he saw few people and none of them appeared interested in him. He looked to his right, saw a spidery stairway similar to the one at the underground river. The stairs led up into gloom and that had to be his direction. Janvert turned, slogged toward the stairs, began climbing, drawing himself up by sliding his left hand on the rail and pulling. His mouth was hanging open with fatigue and the aftermath of that shocking shower.

At the fifth rung on the stairs he saw legs appear at the top. He fired his weapon upward without pausing, kept it humming as he climbed the remaining steps. Five sprawled figures lay on a platform where the stairs ended. He limped around them, his gaze fastened on a door beyond. The door had only a bar latch, which he lifted. The hinges were on the inside to the right. He pulled the bar. The door creaked open, revealing a dank dirty passage and the upthrusting roots of a tree stump which the door's movement had pushed outward and down. Janvert dragged himself past the stump into starlighted darkness, heard the door creaking shut behind him. The stump tipped back into its concealing position as he cleared it, closing with only a faint thump.

Janvert stood shivering in cold night air.

It took him a moment to realize that he had escaped from Hellstrom's madhouse human hive. He peered upward—stars. No doubt of it—he was outside. But where? The starlight gave him few clues to his surroundings. He could see a faint suggestion of trees directly ahead. He groped for the stump that masked the exit. His fingers encountered a hard surface, which a fingernail told him was real wood. His eyes were adjusting, though, and escape from the tunnels had tapped a source of energy he hadn't known existed. There was a faint glow in the sky slightly to his left and he guessed that would be Fosterville. He tried to recall the distance. Ten miles? His overworked body would never make that on bare feet. The area in front of him appeared to be a grassy slope with dark spots in it.

MOST of the water had dried from his body, but he still trembled with the cold. He knew he couldn't delay here any longer. Those bodies behind him would be found. Hellstrom's people would be out here after him all too soon. He had to put distance between himself and that camouflaged exit. No matter how he did it, he had to get back to civilization and tell what he had seen.

Taking the sky glow as his compass point, Janvert set out down the slope. He clutched the captured weapon in his right hand. This thing

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was his passport to belief when he told his story. A demonstration of this weapon on a convenient animal would silence all doubt.

The rough ground hurt his bare feet, caught his toes with unseen rocks and roots. He stumbled, hobbled, ran full into a low wooden fence and fell across it into the dust of a narrow road.

Janvert picked himself up, studied what he could see of the road in the starlight. It appeared to angle down to his left in the general direction of the skyglow. He turned in that direction, stumbled down the dusty track, panting, not trying to be quiet. He was too worn out. The road dipped into a shallow swale and he lost the skyglow for a moment, but had it again at the next gentle rise.

The dust kicked up by his feet tickled his nose. A breeze like a feather touched his right cheek, his arm, his bare flank. The track dipped once more and turned gently to the right into a deeper darkness which suggested trees. He missed part of the turn, stubbed the little toe of his left foot against the edge of a rut. He hissed a curse, kneeled and gripped the injured member until the pain eased. As he crouched he saw a sudden flickering of light in the deepest darkness directly ahead. Reflexively he brought up the captured weapon, pointed it and fired—a single humming burst.

The light vanished.

He straightened, groped his way forward, his left hand outstretched, the weapon held close to his right side. The outstretched hand was too high to meet the next obstruction and he fell across a cold metallic surface, the weapon scraping it with a noisy clatter that froze him for the moment it took him to realize he was sprawled half across the hood of a car.

A car!

He eased himself back, skinned his elbow on a hood ornament, then guided himself with his free hand around the left side of the car. At the window his fingers explored an open crack at the top and he smelled tobacco smoke. He tried to peer through the glass, but could see nothing. A rhythmic wheezing came from inside. He groped for the door handle, jerked the door open with a startling flash of light from the automatic switch. The light revealed two men in business suits, neat white shirts and ties, slumped unconscious in the front seat. The driver held a cigarette—it was smoldering and charring a circle in the left leg of his pants. Janvert took the cigarette, dropped it in the dust by his feet and crushed out the burning cloth with one hand.

The man lighting a cigarette—that had been the flicker of light at which he had fired. This weapon didn't kill from a distance, then. Walls and distance made it less than fatal—and it obviously had a limited range beyond that.

Janvert shook the driver's shoulder, got only a lolling head for response. They were out cold. The movement opened the man's coat, though, revealed a shoulder holster and a snubnosed magnum pistol. Janvert took the gun, saw the radio beneath the dash.

These could not be Hellstrom's people. These were cops.

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XXXI

What the Drone said (Hive axiom): You Outsiders! It's your children we're after, not you! We'll get them, too, over your dead bodies.

"HOW can he be outside?" Hellstrom demanded, outrage amplifying the sudden surge of fear that swept over him. He whirled from the dark north end of the gloomy aerie, strode across the room to the female at the observer console who had called out to him.

"He is," she said. "See! There!" She pointed to the screen glowing with green brilliance in front of her. The screen showed Janvert's figure, it's outline shimmering in the scattered radiation of night-vision projection. Janvert was creeping along a dusty road.

"That's the north perimeter," Hellstrom whispered, recognizing the outline of the landscape beyond Janvert. "How did he get out there?" Reluctant admiration for this incredible male warred in Hellstrom with a swelling rage. Janvert was Outside!

"We're getting reports of a disturbance at Level Three," an observer at Hellstrom's left called.

"He's found one of the hidden doors out of Level Three," Hellstrom said. "How did he get that far? He'll be at that car with its watchers in seconds! The car's right down in those trees." He pointed at the screen. "Have the watchers heard him yet?"

"We have a pursuit team out after him," an observer on the left called. "They'll be a few minutes, though. They were on Five and we routed them through the upper exits."

The observer in front of Hellstrom said, "I got an interference flash just before I saw him, as though he'd used his weapon. Could he have knocked out the watchers in that car?"

"Or killed them," Hellstrom said. "Poetic justice if he did. Who's observing that car?"

"The team was pulled back an hour ago to help search for the escaped captive," someone behind him said.

Hellstrom nodded. Of course! He'd given the order himself.

"There hasn't been any conversation in that car for some time," the observer just to his left said. "I have the pickup in the tree above the car." The observer tapped the shiny ivory plug in her right ear. "I can hear Janvert approaching—the watchers in the car seem to be unconscious. They're wheezing the way Outsiders always do when you stun them heavily."

"Maybe it's a break for us at last," Hellstrom said. "How far away is the pursuit team?"

"Five minutes at the most," someone behind him said.

"Get backup squads out onto the rangeland between him and the town," Hellstrom said. "Just in case."

"What about the other watchers?" the observer in front of him asked.

"Tell our workers not to attract attention to themselves. Devil take that Janvert—the Hive needs breeders that resourceful."

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How had the man escaped from the Hive?

The observer on his left said, "He's almost at the car."

Another farther down the arc called out, "Here's the report on how he got out." She turned, her face in eerie sidelight from the screens, told him briefly what the cleanup teams had found at Level Three.

He rode a food conveyor! Hellstrom thought.

The Outsider took risks no ordinary worker would dream of taking. The implications in that would have to be considered more thoroughly—later.

"The captive female," Hellstrom said. "Has she been shown what will happen to her if she fails?"

Someone behind him spoke with obvious distaste, "She's been shown, Nils."

Hellstrom nodded. They didn't like this, of course. He didn't like it himself. But it was necessity and all of them could see that now.

"Bring her in here," Hellstrom said.

They had to drag her into the range of the dim lights at the observation screens and then hold her upright when they stopped.

Hellstrom suppressed his own revulsion, spoke slowly and distinctly as though to a newly hatched child—and all the time he felt that he was sacrificing himself for the Hive.

"Clovis Carr," he said. "That is the name you give us. Do you still identify with it?"

She stared through the gloom at the greenish death pallor of Hellstrom's skin. *This is a nightmare,* she told herself. *I'll wake up and find out it's all been a nightmare.*

Hellstrom saw the recognition the use of her name aroused. He said, "In a moment, Miss Carr, your friend Janvert will come within range of a remote speaker we have out there." He pointed to the screen. "I will attract Mr. Janvert's attention then and it will be up to you to get him back here if you can. I deeply regret that we must cause you this mental anguish, but you can see the necessity. Will you try?"

She nodded, her face a pale mask of terror in the green light. *Try? Sure? Play right along with the nightmare.*

"Very good," Hellstrom said. "You must think in a positive way, Miss Carr. You must think success. I believe you can do this."

Again she nodded, but it was as though she had no conscious control over her muscles.

> *From the Hive Manual:* The society itself must be considered as living material. The same ethics and morality that concern us when we interfere with the sacred flesh of an individual cell must concern us equally when we intrude into the processes of the society.

JANVERT was reaching for the radio microphone, hardly believing he had that token of civilization within his grasp, when a voice boomed at him from high over his right shoulder.

"Janvert."

He jerked back, slamming the

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door to shut off the car's dome light, dodged to the front of the vehicle and crouched there, pointing his weapon up into the darkness.

The voice came again: "Janvert, I know you can hear me."

It was up there in the trees, but they were too dark to show any detail to Janvert. He found himself locked in indecision. He had been a fool to let the dome light show.

"I am speaking to you through a remote system, Janvert," the voice said. "There is an electronic device in the trees near you. It will pick up your answer and transmit it to me. You must answer me now."

A loudspeaker!

Janvert still crouched in silence. It was a trick. They wanted him to speak just to locate him.

"We have someone here who wants to speak to you," the voice in the trees said. "Listen carefully, Janvert."

At first Janvert failed to recognize the new voice issuing from the speaker. There was a throat-strained quality in the words, as though each required superhuman effort. The voice was a woman's, though, and at last she said, "Eddie! It's Clovis. Please answer me!"

Clovis was the only one who called him Eddie. The others all used that hated Shorty. He stared up through the darkness at the hidden speaker. Clovis?

"Eddie," she said. "If you don't come back they're going to take me down to a—a place where—where they—cut off your legs and the rest—" she was sobbing now—"your legs and the rest of your body at the waist and . . . Oh, God! Eddie, I'm so frightened. Eddie! Please answer me! Please come back!"

Janvert recalled that room of stumped bodies, the multicolored tubes, the hideously accentuated sexuality. Abruptly he experienced flashing memory—the severed head on the tunnel floor, the gore, his own feet trampling through red fruit, his body spattered with . . .

He doubled over, vomited.

Clovis's voice went on and on, pleading with him.

"Eddie, please, can you hear me? Please! Don't let them do that to me. Oh, God! Why doesn't he answer?"

I can't answer her, Janvert thought.

But he had to respond. He had to do something. The air was full of the nauseating smell of his own vomit and his chest ached, but his head felt cleared. He straightened, supporting himself with a hand on the car's hood.

"Hellstrom!" he called.

"Right here."

"How can I trust you?" Janvert asked. He started working his way back to the car's door. He had to get to that radio.

"We will harm neither you nor Miss Carr if you return," Hellstrom said. "We do not lie about such things, Mr. Janvert. You will be placed under necessary restraints, but neither of you will be harmed. We will permit the two of you to associate and have any relationship you wish, but if you do not return to us immediately, we will carry out our threat. We will do so with the deepest regret, but we will do it. Our own attitudes toward a procreative stump are much dif-

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ferent from yours, Mr. Janvert. Believe me."

"I believe you," Janvert said. He was at the car's door now, hesitating. If he opened the door and grabbed for the microphone, what would they do up there? They must have searchers out here by now. They had that speaker in the tree. They had some way of knowing what he was doing. He had to take precautions. He lifted the captured weapon, intending to spray the area around him randomly before opening the door. He didn't allow himself to think about Clovis. But that room . . . His finger on the firing stud refused to move. That room with the stubs of bodies! Again he felt nausea clutching him.

Clovis could still be heard over the speaker. She was crying somewhere in the background, sobbing and calling his name. "Eddie—Eddie—Eddie—please help me. Make it stop—"

Janvert closed his eyes. *What can I do?*

As the thought pulsed in his mind he felt a tingling on his back and right side, heard a distant humming that followed him all the way down to the dusty ground beside the car, but he no longer heard it by the time he was stretched in the dust.

XXXII

> *From the Hive Manual:* Protective resemblance has always been a major key to our survival. This is shown by the oral tradition as well as the earliest written records we have preserved. The mimicry our ancestors learned from insects helps to protect us from the attacks of the wild Outsiders. Observation of insects tells us, however, that the survival value of this device remains low techniques, which we must conbine it with many other techniques and especially with new techniques, which we must constantly search out. To spur us on the way we must think always of Outsiders as predators. They will attack us if they find us. They are sure to find us some day and we must prepare for this. Our preparation must include both defensive and offensive characteristics. In offensive weapons let us always keep the insect as our model—the weapon must condition any attacker against repeating acts of violence against us.

THE vibration of the Hive began somewhere far below the aerie and reached upward and outward with shock waves that would register on seismic recorders all around the planet. When it stopped, Hellstrom thought, *Earthquake!* It was a fearful prayer in his mind, however, not a recognition. *Let it be an earthquake and not the destruction of Project 40!*

He had just begun to relax from the recapture of Janvert not twenty minutes ago when the vibration began.

The aerie stopped creaking and a moment of abnormal silence followed, as though all of the workers of the Hive held their breath simultaneously. In that moment Hellstrom moved through the aerie's gloom, noting that the

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lights still functioned, the screens still glowed.

He said, "Damage reports, please. Somebody get me Saldo." The note of calm command in his voice surprised himself.

They had Saldo on a screen at the right side of the arc within seconds. Hellstrom could see a section of a wide gallery behind Saldo, dust settling there.

"They held me," Saldo greeted him. The younger man looked shocked and just the smallest amount cowed. One of the big symbiotes who attended the Researchers moved in behind Saldo then, thrust him aside. The scarred, ebony features of a Researcher filled the screen. A pink palm came up in front of the face and the fingers winked in Hive-sign.

Hellstrom translated aloud for those who could not see the screen.

We do not appreciate the distrust represented by your sending an observer with orders to delay the power connection for our project. Let the alarm which we know you felt be a small sign of our displeasure. We could have warned you to expect it, but your behavior did not deserve such a warning. Recall the resonance we all felt in the Hive and rest assured that the effect was of an order many thousands of times greater at the locus of our projected impulse. Project 40, except for some small refinements, which may include damping the local feedback, can be judged a complete success.

"Where was the locus of your projection?" Hellstrom asked.

In the Pacific Ocean near the islands the Outsiders call Japan. They will observe a new island there shortly.

The big face moved out of the screen's range to be replaced by Saldo.

"They restrained me," Saldo protested. "They held me and ignored my orders. They connected the power and wouldn't let me call you. They disobeyed you, Nils!"

Hellstrom flashed a *Calm-yourself* . . . sign and, as Saldo fell silent, said, "Complete the loose ends of your observation, Saldo. Assemble a complete fact sheet, including development time for the refinements they mention, then report to me personally in full." He signaled to close the communication, turned away.

The Hive had its defensive-offensive weapon, then, but with it came many other problems. The crisis disturbance which had spread all through the Hive had left its mark on the Researchers. Their ordinary irritability had been amplified into a form of revolt. There was damage to the Hive's interdependence system. This might buy the Hive time to recover, though. Whatever else, it needed long periods of undisturbed time most of all. The big changes devoured great blocs of time. He could see this in himself when he compared himself to the New Breed. Hellstrom held few illusions about himself. He really preferred to vocalize and Hive-sign always represented a strain on him, but for some of the New Breed, this pattern was reversed. For himself, Hellstrom knew he took an unhealthy enjoyment in the possession of a distinct name and Outsider-like

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identity, but most of the Hive's workers were free of this bondage.

I am a transitional form, he told himself, *and some day I will be obsolete.*

> *From the Hive Manual:* Freedom represents a concept tied inextricably to the discredited abstract of individualism/ego. We sacrifice none of this freedom to gain our more efficient, reliable and convenient basic human stock.

MERRIVALE stood on the balcony outside his second-floor motel room, waiting for daylight. The air was cold, but he had dressed in a Highlands-made gray woolen sweater with a high turtleneck. It was thick enough to protect him even when he leaned against the iron balustrade. He puffed thoughtfully on a cigarette, listening to nightsounds. There were distant footsteps out in the parking lot and a murmur of voices rose from a room down the balcony, where a light had come on a few minutes ago.

A door below him opened, sending yellow light in a great splashing fan across the courtyard to the blue edge of the swimming pool. A man strode out into the light, peered upward.

Merrivale, looking over the rail, recognized Gammel and expected the FBI man might have a report on the earth shock. The quake—a distant rumbling that had filled his room with primitive fears—had awakened Merrivale almost forty-five minutes earlier. Gammel had already been awake and in the room downstairs they were using as a command post.

Merrivale had had him on the house telephone in a few seconds, demanding, "What was that?"

"Felt like an earthquake. We're checking out whether there was any damage. You okay?"

Merrivale had turned on his bedside light. There was power at least. After a glance around his room: "Yes, I'm fine. Doesn't seem to be any damage here at all."

Some of the motel's other tenants had been on the balcony and in the courtyard when Merrivale went out after dressing, but most had returned to their rooms by now.

Gammel, recognizing Merrivale on the balcony, motioned for him to come down, said, "Hurry it up."

Something's gone wrong, Merrivale thought. He stubbed out his cigarette, crushed it underfoot and headed down the balcony toward the stairs. There was something tensely alarming in Gammel's manner.

Merrivale made it down to the first-floor room in a swift ten seconds, taking the stairs two at a time, not bothering about noise. He plunged through the door Gammel was holding open from the inside, heard the door slam behind him.

It wasn't until he was fully into the room and saw the three men clustered around a table that held a radio transceiver and a telephone with the receiver off the hook that Merrivale began to get a full sense of how truly wrong things had gone.

A bed stood against the wall behind the table, its covers thrown off and dragged part way into the room. An ashtray had fallen off the

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table and lay ignored in its spilled contents. One of the men around the table still wore pajamas, although Gammel and the others were fully dressed. Light came from two floor lamps which had been pulled close to the table. All the men, including Gammel, were focusing in some way on the telephone with its receiver off. Two were actually staring at the phone. The man in pajamas was looking from the phone to Merrivale, back to the phone, up to Merrivale. Gammel was pointing at the instrument while he glared at Merrivale.

"Damn it to hell—they knew our number!" Gammel blared.

"What?" Merrivale was taken aback by the accusatory tone.

"We had that phone put in late yesterday," Gammel explained. "It's a private line."

"I don't understand," Merrivale said. He studied Gammel's rocky face, seeking a clue to this odd conversation.

"It was Hellstrom calling us," Gammel said. "He says he has one of your people with him and—do you have an Eddie Janvert?"

"Shorty? Shorty led the team that—" Gammel put a hand to lips to shut him off.

Merrivale nodded.

Gammel said, "Hellstrom tells me we'd better listen to your man or they will blow this town and half the state of Oregon off the planet."

"What!"

"He says that wasn't an earthquake we all felt. It was some weapon he claims can rip the planet apart. How trustworthy is your man Janvert?"

Merrivale answered him automatically, "Completely." Immediately he wished he had not said that. It had been a thoughtless response to a question that demanded he defend the Agency's capabilities. Janvert might not be completely trustworthy—or it might be necessary to show doubt of actual trustworthiness. Too late now, though. His answer had trapped him, reduced the range of possible responses.

"Janvert is on that phone and wants to talk to you," Gammel said. "He tells me he can verify Hellstrom's threat and that he can explain why one of our cars is failing to respond on the radio."

Merrivale stalled for time to assess the situation. "I thought you told me the phone to the farm was out of order. Are they calling from the farm?"

"As far as we know. One of my men is out right now trying to work a trace. Hellstrom apparently had the phone fixed himself or it—"

"And one of your cars fails to respond?"

"Janvert says our people are merely unconscious, but he refused to say why or explain. He insisted we get you first. I told him you might be asleep, but—" Gammel nodded at the telephone.

Merrivale swallowed in a dry throat. Blow up half the state? Poppycock! He crossed to the phone with as much confidence as he could muster, picked it up, spoke in his best British accent. "Merrivale here."

Gammel moved to a tape recorder spinning away behind the transceiver, jacked an earphone

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into it, listened while nodding for Merrivale to continue.

THAT'S old Jollyvale all right, Janvert thought as he heard the voice. *Wonder why they sent him?* Clovis stood directly across from Janvert, still frightened, but no longer sobbing. He found it odd that her nudity didn't excite him.

Janvert nodded to Hellstrom, who stood a pace away in the gloomy room above the barn-studio. Hellstrom's face appeared deathly pale in the green light which came from banks of what appeared to Janvert as TV screens.

"Tell him," Hellstrom said.

Merrivale's voice was being broadcast to the entire aerie room from a speaker on the control bank.

"Hello, Joe," Janvert said, deliberately using Merrivale's first name for the first time. "This is Eddie Janvert. I'm sure you recognize my voice, but I'll identify myself further if you want. I'm the one you gave the President's Signal Corps number and code to, remember?"

Damn him! Merrivale thought, resenting that admission as much as the familiar tone and use of his first name. It was Janvert, though. No doubt of it.

"Tell me what is going on," Merrivale said.

"Unless you want this whole planet to become one giant morgue you'd better listen carefully to what I tell you and you'd better believe me," Janvert said.

"Now, see here, Shorty," Merrivale said. "What's all this nonsense they've been telling me about blowing up—"

"You shut up and listen!" Janvert snapped. "You hear me? Hellstrom has a weapon that makes an atom bomb look like a child's popgun. Those guys in the car, those FBI agents your buddy was worried about—they were knocked out by a little hand version of this weapon. That hand-held weapon can kill people at a distance or just knock them out. Believe me, I've seen it. Now, you—"

"Shorty," Merrivale interrupted, "I think you'd better let me come up there and—"

"Oh, you'll come up here all right," Janvert said. "But if you have any doubts, get rid of them. And if you try to attack this place again—well, if I even suspect you *might* do that, I'm going to use that number and code you gave me and I'm going to call the President to give him a full—"

"Now, Shorty! Your government wouldn't—"

"Screw the government! Hellstrom's weapon is zeroed in right now on the Capitol. They've already demonstrated its effectiveness. Why don't you check that?"

"Check what? That little earthquake we—"

"The new island off the coast of Japan," Janvert said. "Hellstrom's people have a tap on the Pentagon's satellite teletype relay. They know about it and there's a seismic sea wave warning all around the Pacific Basin already."

"What in the bloody hell are you talking about, Shorty?" Merrivale demanded. As he spoke Merrivale bent over the table, clawed a notepad and pencil into position, scrawled: *Gammel—check that!*

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Gammel bent to read the note, nodded, pointed it out to another agent and then whispered an explanation.

Janvert was talking again, his voice coming out clear and precise as though he were trying to explain something to a disobedient child. "I warned you to listen carefully," Janvert said. "Hellstrom's farm is just one tiny extrusion from a giant complex of tunnels. Those tunnels spread out to hell and gone and they go down more than five thousand feet. They are lined with a special concrete which Hellstrom says is proof against a fission bomb. I believe him. There are some fifty thousand people living in these tunnels. Believe me—please believe me."

Merrivale found his attention caught by the spinning reels on Gammel's tape recorder, lifted his gaze to meet a look of shock in the SAIC's eyes.

Merrivale thought: *Bloody hell! If Shorty's right this isn't a job for us—it's a job for the military.* Somehow Shorty was to be believed. It just wasn't possible that a statement so shocking could be false. Merrivale bent to the notepad, wrote: *Call Army.*

Glancing at the words, Gammel hesitated, then motioned another of his aids to read it and obey. The aide looked at the pad, stared questioningly at Gammel, who nodded vigorously to reinforce the command, then motioned for the man to bend close. Gammel whispered for a moment and the aide's face paled. He dashed out of the room.

"As unbelievable as your story sounds," Merrivale said, "I will take your word for it at the moment. However, you must know what I will have to do in response. This is far too big a situation for me to—"

"You son of a bitch! If you attack, the whole planet's done for!"

Merrivale froze in shock, the phone pressed against his ear, detected a glint of shared response in Gammel's eyes. That was *not* how one addressed a superior!

IN THE Hive aerie, Hellstrom leaned close to Janvert, whispered, "Tell him the Hive wishes to negotiate. Temporize. Ask him why he hasn't investigated with the Pentagon about the new island. Tell him we are quite ready to vaporize an area of several hundred square miles around Washington, D.C., if he needs further demonstrations."

Janvert relayed this message.

"Have you seen this weapon?" Merrivale asked.

"Yes."

"Describe it."

"Are you nuts? They won't let me describe it. But I've seen it and I've seen the little hand version of it."

The first aide Gammel had sent from the room returned, whispered hoarsely in the SAIC's ear. Gammel scribbled on the notepad: *Pentagon confirms. They're sending assault team.*

Merrivale said, "Shorty, do you really believe they can do this?"

"I've been telling you nothing else, damn it! Haven't you checked with the Pentagon yet?"

"Shorty, I hate to say this, but it seems to me that several fission bombs, one right on top of the other into—"

"You damned idiot! Will you

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stop making stupid suggestions?"

Merrivale glared at the base of the telephone. "Shorty, I must ask that you moderate your tone and your passions. This sounds like the very kind of subversion we must—"

"I'm calling the President," Janvert said. "You know I can do it. You gave me the Signal Corps number and code yourself. He'll answer, too. You and the Agency can go plumb straight to—"

"Shorty!" Merrivale was outraged and abruptly fearful. This thing was getting completely out of hand. Janvert's fanciful warnings might have some substance in them—the military would find out about that quickly enough—but a call to the President would have widespread repercussions. Heads would roll.

"Calm yourself, Shorty," Merrivale said. "Now listen to me. What assurance do I have that you're telling me the truth? You describe a pretty desperate situation—one I find extremely difficult to believe. If it is anything even remotely resembling what you describe, however, it clearly calls for a military solution and I've no alternative but to—"

Janvert asked, "Haven't you understood a single thing I've said? There won't be any world for your damned military solution to take place on if you make one wrong move now! There won't be anything! These people can blow the planet apart—or pulverize any piece of it they choose. You couldn't break through to them in time to prevent that. The planet's at stake—the whole planet, do you understand me?"

Gammel reached out, grabbed Merrivale's telephone arm and shook it to demand attention. Merrivale looked at him.

Gammel held up a sheet of paper on which he had written: *Go along with him. Ask personal inspection visit. Until we're sure, we cannot take chances.*

Merrivale pursed his lips in thought. Go along with him? That was madness. Blow up the world, indeed! He said, "Shorty, I'm sure my own profound doubts about this—"

ABRUPTLY Gammel dropped his earphones, grabbed the telephone out of Merrivale's hand, thrust Merrivale aside and motioned for two of his aides to hold Merrivale.

"Janvert," Gammel said, "this is Waverly Gammel. I spoke to you a few minutes ago when you first called. I'm a senior agent with the FBI. I've been listening to your conversation and I, for one, am ready to go along with—"

"They're just stalling!" Merrivale shouted, struggling with the agents who held him. "They're bluffing, you fool! They can't—"

Gammel put a hand over the receiver, addressed his men: "Take him outside and shut the door." He returned to his conversation with Janvert, explained, "That was Merrivale. I've had him forcibly removed. Under the circumstances I suspect he must be insane. I am going to come out to that—that *hive* myself and I am going to look at whatever it is you can show me to substantiate this weird story. I will

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ask that any action from this end be delayed until I report back, but I will put a time limit on that. Do you understand all of that, Janvert?"

"You sound like somebody with a few smarts, Gammel," Janvert said. "I thank God for that. Just a minute."

Hellstrom bent close to Janvert, spoke in a low voice.

Janvert said, "Hellstrom says you can come out here under those terms and will be permitted to report back in person. It's my opinion that you can trust him."

"That's good enough for me," Gammel said. "Tell me exactly where I report at that farm."

"Just come to the barn," Janvert said. "That's where it all begins."

As Janvert replaced the telephone in its cradle, Hellstrom turned away, wondering why he no longer felt tired. The Hive was going to get its big block of time. That seemed obvious. There were a few among the wild Outsiders who could be reasoned with—people such as this Janvert and the agent on the telephone, that Gammel person. Such people would understand the implications of the Hive's new stinger. They would recognize the need for change. Things were going to change in this world, too. Hellstrom knew what his own course had to be. He would bargain with the Outsider government for conditions under which the Hive could continue its mimic existence unobserved by the wild masses. The secrecy could not last indefinitely, of course. The Hive itself would see to that. They were going to swarm before long and there was nothing the Outsiders could do to prevent that swarming. Swarm would follow swarm thereafter and the wild ones would be assimilated and pushed back into smaller and smaller portions of the planet they shared now with tomorrow's humans.

From Joseph Merrivale's report to the Agency Board: As you know we are effectively blocked from any further active participation in this matter, a decision whose shortsightedness we all recognize. We are consulted on the problem from time to time, however, and I can give you some idea of how things are proceeding in Washington.

My own private guess at the moment is that this Hellstrom will be permitted to continue with his filthy cult at least for the time being—and he may even be allowed to continue making his subversive films.

The see-saw of the official debate is polarized at this moment around the following two opposing viewpoints:

1) Blast them out and damn the consequences. This is a minority viewpoint which I share, but which is losing adherents.

2) Stall for time by making a secret agreement with Hellstrom, thereby keeping knowledge of the Hive from the public, while at the same time we mount a massive research program aimed at destruction of what is coming to be called in most official circles "The Hellstrom Horror." ★

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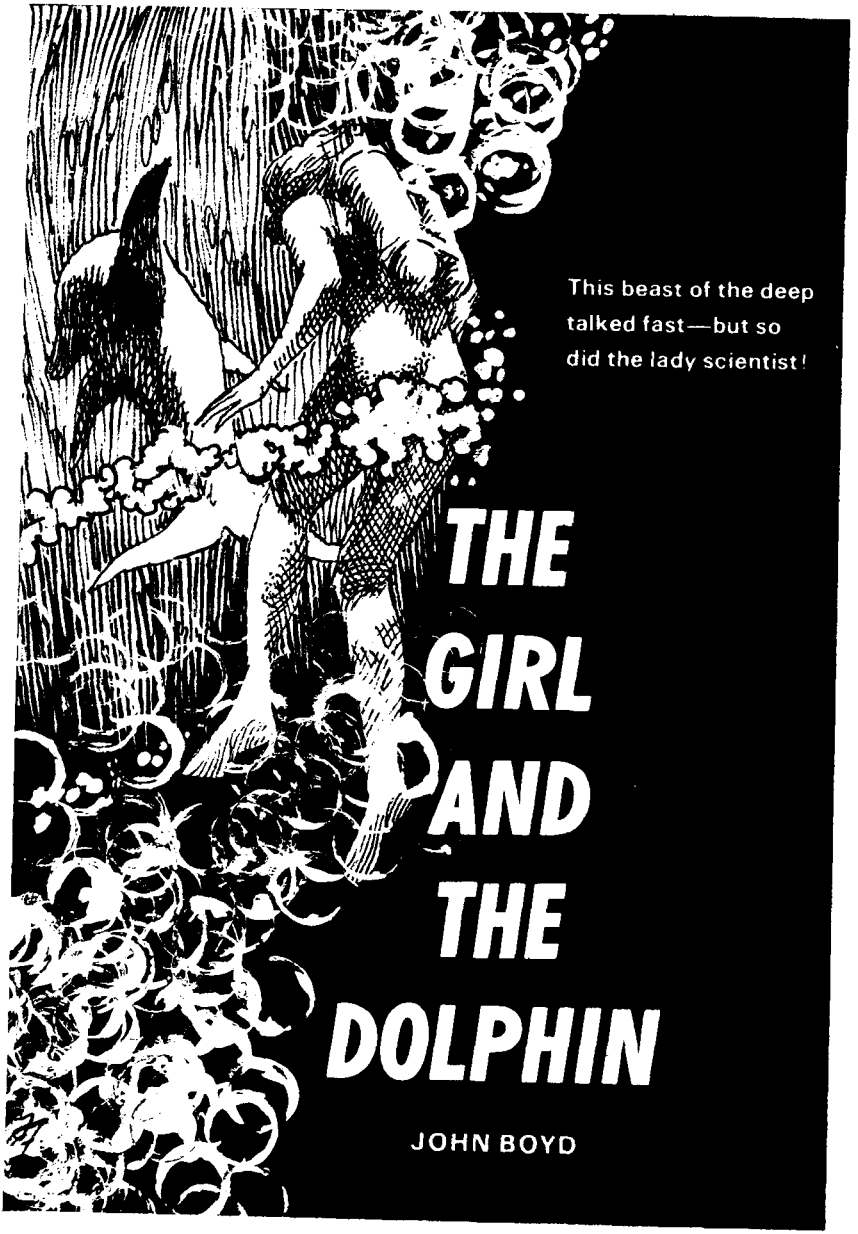

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OF LATE there have been pods of monographs written by linguists *cum* psychiatrists inferring that Celia Hammersmith drowned herself off Point Fermin because she could find no more worlds to conquer and/or could never find love. Such speculations are untreated ambergris. After pioneering the greatest breakthrough in the history of linguistics Celia Hammersmith died inadvertently from raptures of the deep. I know because I was there, sharing her rapture.

It is of public record that the Celia Hammersmith College of Delphinology was opened by government grant to exploit the talents of the world's foremost linguist. Of course there were political overtones to the establishment of Celia's Hermosa Beach facility—politicians were wooing the woman's vote—but the grant reflects accurately the preeminence she had at thirty-one achieved in her profession. C.H.C.D. was founded to train delphinologists and to research methods of communicating with dolphins. I count it no small honor that I was the first dolphin in Celia's tank.

Our meeting was inevitable. Hermosa Beach is only a few miles north of the Marineland of the Pacific where I was the star of the Great Aquatic Burlycue. All dolphins are burlesque artists, Celia once told me. I was the hammiest of the hams—my act always brought down the net. Rising out of the water with a plastic top hat abaft my beak, I would grasp a cane under my right flipper and, balancing almost vertically on my flukes, thrash half across the tank while the band played *The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo.*

We dolphins have an affinity for human beings. To my natural inclination add the convivality of a hot-blooded Mediterranean dolphin, all male and eight feet long. Tank born and aquarium bred, to me *Homo semi-sapiens* was as familiar as my mother's milk. Still, until I met Celia you all looked alike to me, of one sex, upright and bifurcated. Your swiveled heads and stuck-out ears are your least attractive features. Still, I'm tolerant. Nothing is wrong with your head that a hearing-aid would not fix, as Celia recognized.

She did not have the ears for our frequencies, but she devised an acoustic converter attached to an underwater listening device and put an old dolphin into the tank with me. Since he was almost too feeble to bounce an echo off a net, I gave him a few turning directions, at first. An overhead camera revealed his responses to my instructions and Celia, alone in her office, was deciphering the sounds.

At night the old bull talked of his youth in the open ocean, of the cows he had led to calving, the straight-line swimming, the fights

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with sharks. He was a Nebraska farmer telling a Tasmanian about the delights of corn husking. All I got from his stories was an attack of agoraphobia. The thought of all that water outside my tank scared the hell out of me.

So there I cowered, at the age of seven, nostalgic over my aborted career in burlesque while the oldster wheezed and clicked. In her office Celia Hammersmith was listening to the old bull's tales with far more interest than I.

One night the center net of the tank was lowered, trapping me in the landward end of the tank and the oldster on the seaward side. Then the sea gates were opened, and the oldster swam out into the lagoon wheezing "So long, cousin." For a while I listened to his soundings and got him beyond the breakwater. The gates closed—the net lifted and I was alone in the tank.

BY INSTINCT and choice, dolphins are gregarious—nothing is lonelier than a lonely dolphin. Three days and three nights I spent without seeing a living being. Meals were fed to me from a dump bucket on an overhead trolley.

Celia had put me in solitary.

On a night of a full moon with no sound in the tank but that of my own breathing, I heard a splash followed by the *flop-flop* of a human swimmer approaching me. Then a hand was stroking my flipper, another tweaking my dorsal, as my tympans were quivered by a gently mocking vibration.

"Well met by moonlight, lonely cetacean."

What would you think, cousin, if your house cat looked up to tell you it was feeling ill? For a certainty you would look for the ventriloquist before you went for the catnip. At least you would have that alternative to my complete stupefaction.

"My name is Celia," the voice continued. "You're called Happy. I want to be your friend."

Since "friend" is a dangerously amorphic word in Delphine, I was shocked into deeper silence and had to assume it was a "she" who spoke.

"Happy is a good name. It's the sound of leaping and splashing and tossing a ball through a hoop. It fits you. You were especially chosen by me after I saw you in the burlesque show. Such verve. Such marvelous spontaneity. Such intelligence."

Be aware mine is a liberal translation. Delphine is communicated in larger units and faster than human speech. It has to be. Without that survival device, the only dolphin extant would be Grampus orca the killer whale.

"Happy, we'll never get to know each other unless you speak. I'm talking to you through a flutter diaphragm held to the roof of my mouth. My ear plugs are acoustic converters. I'll understand you, so

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speak to me, Happy. Quit being so damned coy!"

My silence was not coyness. The dolphin's code is a complex cabala and my instincts held it sacred. Without it we might lose dominion over the sea—and despite my lack of bigotry I was a little wary of man. What sea-dweller would not be after Eniwetok and Bikini?

Celia's voice had lost its pique when she spoke again. "Our species have much in common, Happy. You are lords of the sea and we are lords of the land. We're both warm-blooded, intelligent mammals. My hand is a rudimentary flipper."

Oh, Celia was smooth—ponder her last remark—but I kept silent. I repeat: I like human beings, but they are not dolphins.

"I won't hurt you, Happy. I'm a cow and you're a bull."

Another remark worth pondering. So humans were not of one sex!

"Don't you like me a little, Happy?" She tweaked my dorsal again. "Say something for me—and I'll give you an extra herring for breakfast."

I would not say anything but I gave her an affectionate nudge with my flipper. After all, she said she was a cow.

"Well, that's worth a sardine," she laughed. "But you think it over. I'll keep you in solitary tomorrow to give you plenty of time to think, and I'll be back tomorrow night. I simply must discover if your verbal wit equals the comic mimicry that always brought down the net at the Great Aquatic Burlycue. So long, cousin."

The loneliest sound I have ever heard was the *flip-flop* of her withdrawing strokes, but a linguistic note is in order here. Some African dialects employ a click-speech similar to the click of a dolphin and some Canary Islanders communicate by whistling. Celia's background in such languages helped her to synthesize an almost flawless Delphine.

I DELIBERATED until next evening, since all I could do was deliberate. The old bull was the code breaker, not me, but my reluctance to engage in interspecies communication was false pride. As Celia had pointed out, dolphins and men were co-equal lords of sea and land. Fraternization, viewed in this light, became nothing more than *noblesse oblige*. Besides, after being in solitary all day, by nightfall I was willing to whistle back to a whistle-buoy.

When I heard her splash into the tank, I silently sank to the bottom, listening to her splashing above me and calling, "Happy, where are you?"

I was rising to nudge her with my beak and to surface beside her, rolling over to reveal my underside. As a delphinologist Celia surely recognized the signal: "flashing the white."

She scratched my belly and slap-

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ped it, asking, "How does that feel, Happy?"

"Like wallowing in a school of tuna."

My reply was not *Lafayette, we are here* or *One short step for a man*, but it was the first concept delivered to a human being by a dolphin through the fibrillation of a blowhole.

"Now it's down to business, you teaser," she said, shaking my flipper. "First you must learn human metaphors. You should have said, 'It's more fun than a barrel of monkeys.' "

So my beginning association with Celia Hammersmith was purely on a teacher-student basis. With a confidence approaching arrogance she had readied an English-to-Delphine translating machine and began immediately to pipe lectures into my tank. My first week was spent on vocabulary exercises and the rudiments of English grammar, my second on a survey of human history. From the knowledge gained in such fashion, cousins, I gathered that you've come a long way from the day you crawled out of the ocean to crack crabs and develop your rudimentary flippers. I am not sure in which direction you've come.

Since sleep is a luxury few sea creatures can afford, I listened night and day to the lectures. The only break in my lessons came when Celia paddled out in the evenings to review my day's intake in a question-and-answer period. When I asked the wrong questions I got a "no comment" and was deprived of my belly slap. Celia was teaching me manners as well as metaphors.

In my fourth week I taped, via a translating machine, the first monograph authored by a dolphin, *Delphinic Idioms and Speech Patterns*. Despite its historical value the Institute's publications department refused to publish it because it lacked footnotes, this despite a paragraph in the dissertation explaining the absence of the concept "foot" in Delphine.

NEVERTHELESS, Celia appointed me instructor in Delphine and assigned me two tankside classes a day. My lectures were spoken into a translating machine and broadcast to my students in English. The students took notes but never laughed at my witticisms. My humor must have been lost in translation. At this stage I would have preferred to strut across the tank with my top hat and cane while the band played *The Man Who Broke the Bank at Monte Carlo*.

In the evenings Celia came to lie beside me on an air mattress and review my lessons. She began to stay longer, often until midnight, and to talk more about herself and her childhood. Gradually I came to detect nuances in her whistles and clicks which bespoke her sadness

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over a life which had found its only expression in a driving urge to work. In a way I was her psychiatrist, but I was also relieved by her presence. The squeaks, squeals, whistles and clicks of the lectures were silenced when she came—and frankly I was becoming more interested in Celia and what she thought of me than I was in the Punic Wars.

Concerned by my students' indifference to my verbal wit, I asked her one night to give me her evaluation of me as a conversationalist.

"Your speech is rhetorical, even flamboyant by human standards, though for all I know you may be a laconic dolphin. Really, there's no way for me to compare your standing with other dolphins unless. . ."

She paused, silent and pensive.

"Unless what, Celia?"

Suddenly she rolled on her side to face me, speaking with a pell-mell breathlessness as if she had been suddenly seized by an exciting notion. "Unless I opened the gates some night—to let you go out and lure some fellow dolphin back into the tank with you. You could do it, Happy. With your flamboyant rhetoric and fantastic charm, you could talk the horn off a narwhal. Would you like to try?"

I considered her request, which had as many ramifications as a giant squid. I would have preferred an electric eel in my tank to a fellow dolphin to share Celia's attention—and to get one, as Celia well knew, I would have to bring back the whole school and turn my tank into a sardine can. Besides, if she needed another dolphin she could requisition one at the government's expense. So why had she made such a proposal?

Suddenly I intuited the answer—Celia was testing my loyalty to her. But an unproved intuition is an idle fancy. I had to be sure this one was right or become the world's first red-faced, jackass dolphin.

I heaved a long, sad sigh from my blowhole and fibrillated wistfully, "It might be fun to cruise out and cut some lovely young cow from the herd to share my tank and learn my tricks."

"Oh, no! I'm permitting no *ménage a trois* in this tank."

Celia did not know it, but she had been tossed on my fluke. My intuition was precisely correct.

"Well, there goes my contribution to science," I said.

"Science, hah! From that smarmy sigh I'd say that hanky-panky's more like it."

There had been a shift in our relationship and the time for honesty had come. I nudged her raft contritely. "Celia, I was just splashing a little spray in your eyes. You're the only companion I want. My wit and my rhetoric are only for you."

So saying, I emitted a longer, smarmier sigh.

"Oh, bosh! Fiddlesticks!" she

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said, but she tweaked my dorsal.

Perhaps it was on that night that a channel marker floated past and an unseen helmsman changed our course. Certain I am that I have never felt closer to any mammal, cetacean or *Homo sapiens*, and our rapport stirred a curiosity in my mind. In a manner I intended to be casual but actually was tense, I asked, "Celia, would you pipe me a course in human anatomy?"

IF SHE noticed my tension she did not let on and piped in the course. Soon I was studying the students at the tank side who were studying me. Females, I noticed, carried an extra set of buttocks on their chests. Celia told me they were mammary protuberances which all female mammals had in common, she as well as my own mother. Looking at Celia's, I had to take her word for it, but for the life of me I couldn't remember mama's.

She augmented my course in human anatomy with evening remarks on comparative anatomy.

Human mating is a contact sport. Dolphin mating is a collision sport in which a sonic lure replaces courtship. Buffering the tale with long, Latin words, Celia told me of an attendant in a Florida aquarium who sounded in jest a recording of the mating call of a female *Delphinis delphis* while submerged. The wag's last memory was of sixteen torpedo-shaped objects hurtling toward him at thirty knots. In seconds he was sodomized to shreds.

Anatomy became the next to last science that I studied. Celia was changing my curriculum to emphasize the arts. In order to enrich my metaphorical language, I was given four hours of poetry every morning, fifteen minutes of Shakespeare and three hours and forty-five minutes of Romantic Poetry.

Shakespeare's good but he's a little too rich for my blood. From the outset I felt an affinity for Lord Byron—which grew stronger as the strangely disturbing concepts of romance swam within my ken. I learned of women wailing for their demon lovers and wondered about human female preferences. I pondered such lines as *How do I love thee?* My favorite poem was Byron's *To Augusta*, and Celia's was *Leda and the Swan*. She also read me certain passages from Jeffers' *Roan Stallion*. One poem, at the time our mutual favorite, which I never wish to hear again, is *The Forsaken Merman*.

Our discussions about the concepts of the poems bred an intimacy between Celia and me. Although, by using Latinate circumlocutions, Celia explained the mechanics of romance, she was never able to define love.

"One must feel it, Happy. Love can't be defined without first being felt. Shelley called it 'desire of the moth for the star, a devotion to

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something afar from the sphere of our sorrow.' "

A sadness in her voice pained me. To divert her I asked, "What's a moth?"

"A fluttering, light-seeking insect. . . Oh, Happy, I must pipe you a course in entomology."

I had stuck my flipper in my blowhole. I needed a course in entomology like I needed a course in home economics, but I had diverted Celia. Rather abruptly I returned to the original subject.

"Now that we've heard about love from Shelley, what's the word from Hammersmith?"

"I confess, Happy, love is one of the few areas in which I'm not an expert. You see, I've never been in love. I'm quite tall for a woman. Because of my intelligence and my height, boys always looked on me as an object. On the other hand, I feel uncomfortable with a male under six feet long with an I.Q. of less than a hundred and sixty. Still, I haven't answered your question, have I?"

A pensive huskiness replaced the sadness in her voice.

"I think love is a rapport between a male and a female mammal who regard each other with tenderness, who sense each other's moods, who delight in each other's wit and rhetoric. But I'm so busy, Happy. Any male I could even consider would have to be one involved with me in my work."

She sighed and continued, "Now I suppose I am loved by my students, not as an object but as an institution, the Celia Hammersmith College of Delphinology."

"You are uniquely beloved, Celia," I assured her. "Most students revere their institution only as an abstraction—only the students of Hammersmith have their alma mater embodied in so lovely a package of such infinite variety."

My remark was pure spermecetti. I was hard put to tell the difference between the sexes, much less recognize intersex comeliness. But my words served their purpose—which was to cheer her up—for suddenly she turned to me.

"Happy, don't you ever yearn for the free sweep of the open ocean, the wind's song, the whitecaps dancing in glee?"

From the spontaneity of her remark, I knew she was voicing a well-thought plan, and her wishes were not mine. The idea of all that ocean out there still scared the hell out of me.

Noncomittally I answered, "The old bull spoke of it with longing, but I'm afraid of depths. In anything over nine fathoms, I'd be lost." Then I added the clincher, I thought. "Once I got out there I'd never find my way back to you."

"I'd be with you, Happy. I'd guide you home."

Then she told me the legend of the boy on the dolphin and whimsically suggested that we rewrite the

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legend as The Girl on the Dolphin. So contagious was her enthusiasm that within five minutes I was taking Celia, mounted abaft my dorsal, for a spin around the tank. Maneuvering was easy enough although the wool of her bathing suit chafed me slightly.

We planned a shakedown cruise on the morrow evening to test the strength of my phobia and my fatigue factor. Celia promised to eliminate the skin irritant by removing the bathing suit if I kept her nudity secret. I told her my name was Happy, not Gabby.

IT WAS no surprise to me, the next night, when she arrived at the tank with a harness designed to my contours which must have taken a week to fabricate. In the darkness she harnessed me, slithered out of her bathing suit, opened the sea gates and mounted me. I moved out at a modest three knots to minimize my wake and to prevent night strollers on the jetty from spotting my naked rider.

So by stealth and by night we slipped the confines of the shore to range the shimmering spaceways of the sea. My agoraphobia vanished beneath the bright beauty of the girl with golden, spray-wet hair, who met my undulations with her own, and so light a burden was never borne by dolphin. Celia was a natural-born, bare-tailed bareback rider.

Off Portuguese Bend, she found she could stay astride me by leg pressure alone and tossed the harness away. The last artifact of man was gone from between us. Night and silence claimed us as we climbed and descended the heaves of the off-shore swells, and the wine-dark ocean was less a mystery to me than the joys of our passage. Finally she guided me home, steering me with nudges of her kneecaps. In truth I could have found my way back to Hermosa Beach, via the great circle route, from Taiwan, but I didn't tell Celia. I enjoyed the kneecap nudges.

We got home around one o'clock.

Thereafter our nights were filled with revelry which began when Celia whopped my belly with her heels and cried, "Away, Happy! Westward ho."

Oh, they were joys, our nightly gambols. With my sonar we avoided driftwood. With Celia's eyesight we swam wide of the running lights of vessels. In the darkness our passing was marked only by our phosphorescent wake, which I now think of as a symbol of our love, so bright yet fading so swiftly into eternal darkness.

My favorite of the games we played was "crack the whip." I would try to unseat Celia by quick, high-speed turns, thus forcing her to grip me tighter with both legs, both arms, and all four buttocks. Her favorite game was "bucking bronco," in which I tried to toss her

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from my back with extreme and rapid undulations. In this game she could only retain her seat by thigh pressure and by arching her body to maintain her balance. With her shrieking, "Ride 'im, cowgirl!" and me churning up a few square miles of water, there must have been some surprised albacore in our rodeo grandstands.

Often when I felt her thighs relax I would glide from beneath her and listen, from three or four fathoms, to her thrashing about on the surface and calling my name. When her breathing grew labored I would rise beneath her. It was a way of keeping the knee pressure up.

At times I lolled in the ocean, Celia stretched alongside, her head resting on my flipper, and we discussed the meaning of life, marine and terrestrial. One night, with San Clemente Island bearing 036° true and twenty miles distant, I asked, "Celia, what do you think my I. Q. is?"

"It's incalcuable. An I. Q. measures a human average and there's only one Happy known to man."

"Do you think it's over a hundred and sixty?"

"Perhaps. You're the most brilliant dolphin I ever talked to."

"Thanks."

"Why do you ask a stupid question like that?"

"I'm over six feet long. The thought came to me that if my I.Q. were over a hundred and sixty I might qualify as your ideal male mammal."

She giggled, the one human sound any dolphin recognizes, and said, "For all the good it does you, you are my favorite male mammal."

I KNEW what she meant from the supplementary lectures in comparative anatomy and simply to let her know that I understood the meaning of her mirth, I said, "Ah, yes. The sonic romantic barrier."

She had been lying with her head on my flipper, completely relaxed. Suddenly I felt her neck muscles tighten.

"Happy, I've forgotten something. We must hurry home—now."

As she spoke, she was swinging astride me and the rapport we had established told me she was a very frightened girl. Calling to her to hang tight, I beat shoreward at twenty-two knots, and she did not relax until we entered the harbor. By then I had hypothesized an explanation for her terror, verifed by her remark as she closed the sea gates. "Happy, we'll have to stop these nightly rambles. Lack of sleep is killing me."

As far as it went she spoke the truth—we were in early and it was 2:30 A.M. But my remark had alerted her to a danger neither of us had considered. If we had been thirty miles out to sea and a female

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dolphin anywhere within a ten-mile radius had sounded her love call, Celia's great and loyal friend, Happy, would have been off like the Flying Dutchman, leaving Celia to the loneliness of the long-distance swimmer.

Among male dolphins, the Song of the Siren is not a legend but a fact. I could not, in all honesty, dissuade Celia from her unvoiced fear. Except as a racial memory I had never heard the siren's song, but I was getting eager to hear the music.

So it was back to the air mattress in the tank and our evening talks, now grown lackadaisical despite the affection between us. Lolling in the confines of a tank grown oppressive, we shared our unvoiced dream of high romance beyond the seawall. Celia grew irritable and petulant. I lost my appetite, even for Quinalt salmon. Our inner tensions grew. We were wasting away together.

Finally Celia could stand it no longer. On the tenth night of our captivity, she made an announcement.

"Happy, I'm going to Marineland, tomorrow."

"Not to get me a fellow tank mate, I hope."

"Would you be terribly upset if I did?"

"I'd ask for a transfer back to burlesque. You could change my name to Unhappy. I'd sulk. How could I talk to you with some beakish female listening to every sound?"

"Of course I'd never share you, Happy. No, I'm going to listen to some tape recordings and I'm giving you a day off from lectures and lecturing. I want you well rested. And if it will ease your mind I'll pipe in something diverting. Would you like Brahms, Beethoven, Bach?"

"No. I'll take the complete works of Byron. Why do you want me rested?"

"We're going to sea again tomorrow night."

With that I flipped her air mattress and went leaping around the tank in confined joy. When she clambered back atop the mattress I was calm enough to listen further.

"I wish to go to a kelp bed in a Catalina cove. I'm writing a paper on the nocturnal habits of kelp fish."

"Kelp fish! When did you strike up this romance?"

"A girl likes to have a few secrets, Happy. After we're there you can patrol the inlet to keep out sharks."

This was one hell of a way for me to spend an evening out, patrolling the bar while she fondled kelp fish. I fell silent.

"What are you thinking about, Happy?"

"The life of a sea lord—one night a bucking bronco, the next a watch dog."

"Oh, it won't be all work."

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The next night she came, bringing an aqua-lung. Without a word of greeting she opened the sea gates, took off her bathing suit, put on the aqua-lung and mounted me. She did not give me the customary belly whop with her heels. Instead she issued me sailing orders in a peculiarly strained voice, "Head south-southwest to the western tip of Catalina and follow the northeast coast line. Don't dally—and don't undulate excessively."

Nothing more was said as we put to sea. Her rigid thighs and silence told me she was distraught, consumed by some inner urgency. Keeping to course, I propelled us by a rapid flutter of the flukes, holding my body to a minimal pitch.

BY ELEVEN-THIRTY I am hove to a hundred yards offshore from the kelp beds, keeping a sonic lookout for sharks and hoping one will appear. I am in the mood for splitting a shark's aorta, bursting a liver and sending one of those saw-mouthed bastards spiraling down into that bourne from which no shark returns.

My mood is at odds with the scene. Inshore I hear Celia working among the kelp beds. A full moon is rising above Point Fermin. A breeze stands fair from Asia. To westward along the reaches of the headland I hear the long withdrawing roar of the surf.

Then it came, the beginning solo of a *Delphinis* angel, the tremulous, quavering, beckoning, flute-like opening.

I wheeled. The sound was coming from inshore, flooding the waters of the cove. The music changed to the tympanic ripple of drums and my body quivered, waiting. The first notes of an organ rose above the drums.

The organ notes did it. Before the bar had gone half a measure I was barreling toward the beach at forty knots, seeking the source of the siren's song.

In eight feet of water and an aqua-lung I found waiting for me on the sandy bottom all the sirens of legend: Parthenope, Leucosia, Ligea. Waiting for me was the apotheosis of feminine mammalian beauty, Earth mother of the sea-born, queen among women and mistress of aural mimicry—Celia Hammersmith. Celia had listened well to the recordings at Marineland and learned every note of the language of the dolphin's heart.

Separated by millennia, the tides of our mammalian blood swirled together again in an eddy, a vortex, a maelstrom. My cousin, my bride, returned to the sea, or at least to its littoral strand—a problem of purchase was solved in the shallows—and returned to her forsaken merman.

Together we erased eons and that night Celia Hammersmith found love. By her own admission, later, as we lolled on the sand, I was the

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most esoteric bit of erotica in the history of feminine diversions.

Had we left well enough alone, this treatise need never have been recorded to silence the slithering sprats of conjecturists who insinuate Celia's drowning was suicide But eons were not enough for one night. Who can turn his gaze away after glimpsing paradise?

Coursing homeward, I was dolphin transfigured bearing woman transformed. No longer inhibited by propriety, we talked of the wonder we had shared. Celia confessed that I had long been her ideal male, eight feet long with an incalculable I.Q.

"But I love you as much, Happy, for your flamboyant rhetoric, your irrepressible good humor and your wit."

"I'll buy the first two," I said, "but no one laughs at my jokes except you."

"The others haven't grasped the subtleties of cetacean humor. But give them time. Someday you'll be the world's most famous lie-down comic."

In turn I confessed how I had long adored her whimsy, her golden hair, her downside-up buttocks and the pressure of her kneecaps abaft my dorsal. "But your singing really gets me, Celia."

Somewhere over the Santa Barbara Deeps, Celia grew concerned over a lack of reciprocity in our love. I had joined with her on the littoral strand which made me a shallow-water merman. To make us co-equals in love, she should join with me in this fathomless water and become a true mermaid. I didn't question her logic, but I did point out the problem of purchase we had solved in the shallows. Here, the bottom lay furlongs below.

Celia's clicks and whistles conveyed an enigmatic whimsy as she told me she could solve the problem. She asked, "Are you game for a gambol in the deeps, Happy?"

Next month in WORLDS OF IF

DOOMSHIP

A stunning novella about a man who could live as often as he dared— launching the great new series by:

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April issue, on sale March 4

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Women and dolphins are not men. I was willing.

"Sing it, again, Celia. But skip the flutes and drums. Just the organ notes."

Above me I could hear the tempo of Celia's breathing speed up as she put on the mask of the aqua-lung. She checked the oxygen in the cylinder. She was a romantic yet a woman, too, at all times practical.

Sounding the organ notes, she slipped beneath me and grasped my flippers; my horizontal stabilizers were to be her means of gaining purchase. So slight was the downward tilt the weight of the aqua-lung gave my body that I failed to notice my increasing angle of descent as my flukes, with powerful strokes, thrust toward a more perfect union. Seeking rapture in the deeps, we both forgot the rapture of the dark deep—nitrogen narcosis.

At forty or fifty fathoms Celia muttered dreamily, "Happy, darling, I could float like this forever. But the aqua-lung's got to go. It hampers me."

So saying, she took off her aqua-lung and threw it aside. O, double-edged rapture! Too late I realized it was not Celia but the nitrogen talking.

Immediately I levered her upward. We broke surface at an estimated sixty knots. At the apex of a twenty-foot arc we two parted in silence and spray. Celia hit the water first, spread-eagled on the surface. I landed a few feet beyond her.

VAINLY calling her name, I swam a circle around her thrice. In the moonlight her golden hair resembled the petals of a white-stalked sea anemone, rising and falling, ominously horizontal. Then I knew that we would go no more a-roving so late into the night.

In a final act of homage, I nudged her body shoreward down the shimmering moonpath on the sea, carrying her back to the land which had given her birth. So Celia took one last ride with me, but the irrepressible good humor she loved was gone forever. Henceforward I would be Happy in name only. Thus did I mourn.

But that which shapes us binds all nature with similitudes. Out of the whale comes ambergris and out of the ambergris the perfume. Out of my great grief came a melody and out of the melody a good humor more irrepressible than ever.

As I pushed her body landward, I began to chant, lowly and slowly at first, as a Requiem for Celia, the man-song I knew best. Imperciptibly my body began to undulate to the rhythm of the Requiem. I stepped up the tempo, nudging on the up notes, clicking and whistling more loudly: *For - I'm - the - guy - that - married - the - girl - who - broke - up - the - home - of - the - man - who - broke - the - bank - at - Monte - Carlo.* ★

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"My literary biography is short," says John Boyd. And spectacular, add your editors. His first work—a mainstream novel published in 1968—was grabbed by the movies, a book club, four foreign publishers; now a paperback, to date it has sold more than 300,000 copies. His second novel, also published in 1968, was science fiction: THE LAST STARSHIP FROM EARTH. It won mainstream reviews, was selected by the Doubleday Science Fiction Book Club, has been optioned to the movies, was chosen one of the best books of the year by the American Library Association, has lately been reissued by Berkley.

We quote John Boyd further: "I opted for science fiction after two writers I particularly admire—Arthur C. Clarke and Robert A. Heinlein—publicly endorsed Last Starship, and after I received numerous perceptive letters from its readers. I became convinced that the quality of science-fiction readership is exceptionally high. Not then or since did I ever consider 'writing down' to a reader or underestimating his background or intelligence. But I had felt that Last Starship would have limited appeal because it was addressed primarily to literature students in the hope that they might be amused by the arcane illusions and free-wheeling language. Yet the book was received understandingly by science-fiction readers. Thus did Last Starship launch me into s-f as surely as it launched its hero to Planet Hell. Incidentally, the translation of the book's French title is THE LAST SHIP TO HELL."

John adds that to the s-f audience, ". . . a valid social promise can be expressed with wit, subtlety, indirection, sadness, indignation and poetic flights of rhetoric, all in one tale, and in the expectation of being comprehended."

While not definite in his mind about the difference between science fiction and mainstream fiction, he does believe the science-fiction reader, more than others, is prepared in advance for the "willing suspension of disbelief" so essential in coping with the world of the imagination.

His chief aim, John reports, is to tell a good story with a valid theme and believable characters, particularly the latter. Hence in writing *The Girl and the Dolphin* appearing in this issue, all through the bittersweet love story of Celia and Happy he was careful to empathize with both. He tells us, further, that he usually deliberately telescopes the endings of his novels. "Once the plot-strings are knotted, I believe in a quick cut right behind the knot. Any philosophical implications the reader may wish to weigh, he can weigh without me." Of course, the practice can backfire. "One reviewer in the *Los Angeles Times,* I'm convinced, read my ORGAN BANK FARM without discovering how the protagonists ultimately defeated the behavior computer which could plot all their moves in advance. You see, their method was disclosed in an off-beat strategy conference between two surgeons, repeated in the gibberings of a schizoid, and retold again in a song composed by an aphasiac. Too deep for reviewers, I guess. I don't consider reviewers to be among my most intelligent readers."

John was a Naval Reserve officer during World War II, enlisting from Atlanta, Georgia in 1940. He met his wife-to-be while stationed in San Diego, married her in Seattle in 1944. After graduation from U.S.C. in 1947, he became a graphic arts salesman and remained so until 1970, when he began to write full time.

THE I.Q. MERCHANT, recently put out in hardcover by Weybright & Talley, is John's most recently published book. But he has completed another fine novel, THE DOOMSDAY GENE. It concerns the Ideal Man for a Crowded Planet—because he has a genetically inbred "death wish."

THE DOOMSDAY GENE starts in our May issue. It will be a two-parter. Have fun.

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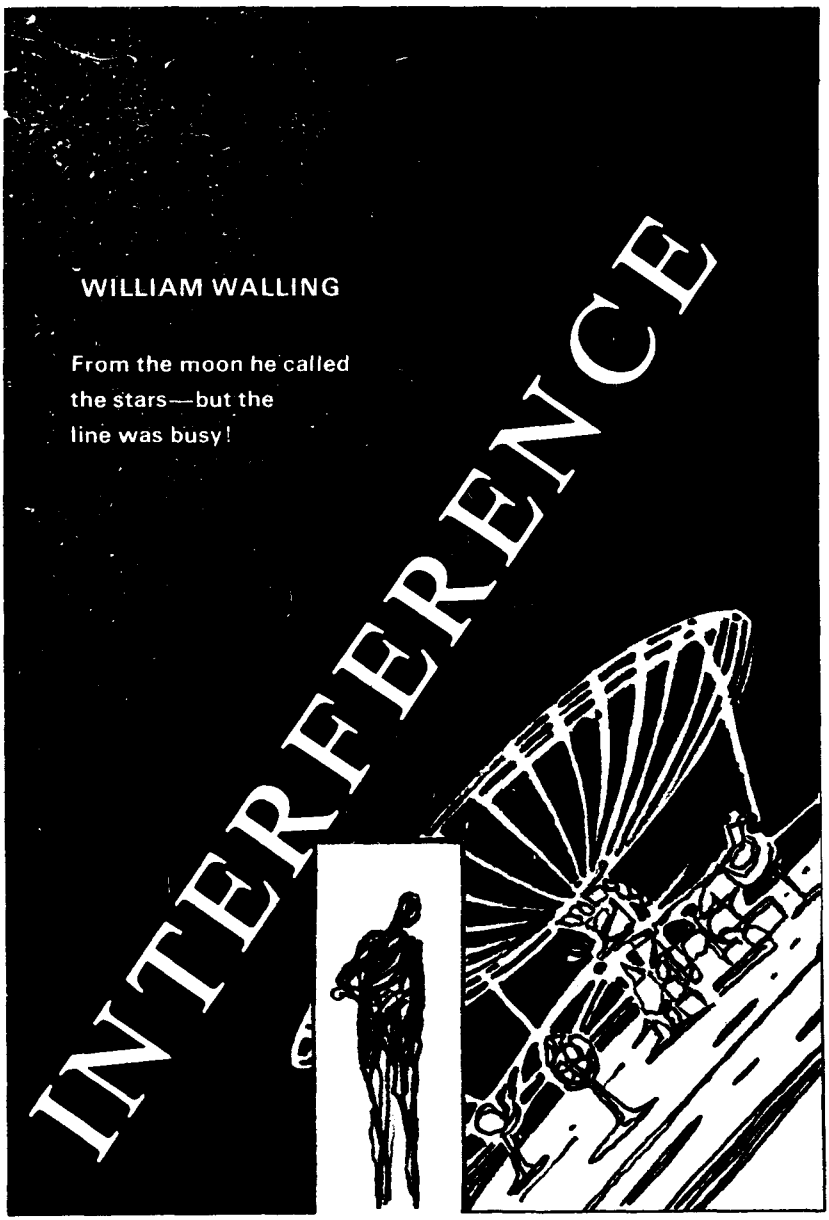
INTERFERENCE

WILLIAM WALLING

From the moon he called
the stars—but the
line was busy!



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"GOOD afternoon, your honor." The newsman rose as Judge M'bui Darrananga swept into his chambers, began divesting himself of his robes and wig.

The judge's handshake was cordial, firm. "Barry, it's a pleasure to see you again. "Sorry to make you wait—my charge to the jury took longer than I'd expected."

"Don't give it a thought." The newsman winced as Darrananga's huge hand enveloped his own. "I appreciate your fitting me into your schedule on such short notice," he said. "I realize that the Lew trial—"

"Isn't what you wanted to talk about," interrupted the judge with a knowing, good-natured smile. "Ethically we shouldn't discuss it until the jury reaches a verdict, you know."

Darrananga stood six and one-half feet tall in his blue-black skin—his merry, patient eyes tended to miss nothing. Robust in his early sixties, he had been born in a Nairobi slum, disenfranchised and meager of prospect as any other black urchin. His climb from the gutters of East Africa to doctor of jurisprudence had culminated behind a bench in the United Nations High Court. There were those who insisted witchcraft had had something to do with it.

"You're aware, of course, that the Lew trial is only a gesture," continued Darrananga, stuffing a calabash pipe with rough-cut tobacco he liked to blend himself. "Lew Chao Leung surely is no murderer—no more than you or I. His family forced the trial to satisfy their egos, their pride. The jury will weigh the evidence—if it can truly be called 'evidence'—and rule Dr. Lew innocent of murder in the second degree. Posthumous trials are rarely meaningful, I'm afraid."

The reporter's grin was sheepish. "I hoped to learn your views on the Dallin incident, your honor."

"Certainly you did. Everyone else is talking about Richard Dallin—why shouldn't we?" Applying a match to the bole of his calabash, Darrananga lolled in the high-backed chair behind his desk, surrounded by a cloud of bluish smoke. "We may never learn what really happened out there," he mused aloud. "The affairs' more romantic overtones—aided by sensational press coverage—have kindled public fancy. We have a double homicide among working scientists in the field, then the otherworldly purpose and remote lunar farside base of Project Ozma itself—next a third death under unusual circumstances and finally a vanished astrophysicist whose diary records visiting aliens from the stars. And an incredible work of art—the photosculpt. By the way, have you seen the Smithsonian exhibit?"

"Last month," said the newsman. "Washington was a furnace."

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Darrananga chuckled. "Ah, yes—late summer isn't the season to visit the American capital. But, didn't you sense the nearness of the unknown in that skylighted gallery, Barry? Music pours from hidden speakers, making chills race along your spine once you know the details of the affair."

"Music?" The reporter looked wary. "I remember the recorded music, yes, but—"

"In a moment, Barry—in a moment," fended Darrananga. "I stood in the Smithsonian for twenty minutes, listening, watching the queue wind past. Chattering visitors would approach the pedestal, come face to face with that eight-inch plastic brick encapsulating diminutive, cameo-perfect human figurines and become suddenly rooted, held by the sort of rapt attention one finds at a showing of Van Gogh or Modigliani. They would stand transfixed until crowd pressure forced them on—to ask futile questions of the guards before wandering off, unsatisfied, toward the exit."

"I suppose we're all—unsatisfied."

"We are indeed. Tell me—do you like music?" The judge leaned forward.

"I—yes, of course."

"Sibelius, Beethoven, the heavier orchestral literature? Perhaps the Bruckner works?"

The newsman frowned, shifting his weight uneasily. "I'm not well acquainted with longhair works. Why do you ask?"

Darrananga reflected for a dozen heartbeats in silence. He slowly laid aside his pipe. "Richard Dallin loved music," he said. "His was a sonorous plea for help, a cry in the night that may or may not have been answered." The judge paused. "Don't mistake me. There is no hint of deception or hoax in the Dallin incident—merely mystery, just an unsolved enigma. The photosculpt rests on its pedestal, an affront to reason and common sense, while the diary—"

"The diary?"

Judge Darrananga rubbed his chin. "The foreman asked for three copies of the diary to take into the jury room for study," he said, looking directly into the newsman's eyes. "I've decided to let you read my personal copy this afternoon, Barry."

The reporter flinched in surprise, sat suddenly straighter. "But isn't the diary still considered evidence?"

"Technically, yes. When the trial concludes Richard Dallin's celebrated diary will at last be published in its entirety. Witholding the final portion to keep prospective jurors unprejudiced was silly, to say the least. I'm certain the Lew trial is in its last hour."

The newsman's eyes widened. "Believe me, I'll consider permission to preview the diary a great privilege, your honor. "May I ask

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bluntly—have you formed an opinion about Dallin's fate?"

"An opinion? As the Lord is my witness, I form a new opinion daily." The judge opened the top drawer of his desk. He lifted out a thick, unbound stack of fascimiles, laying them reverently before the newsman. "I've earmarked those entries which seemed most pertinent with tape. Read them first. They'll provide an overview. Later, if you wish, you may browse through the remainder at your leisure."

"Thank you, Judge Darrananga. Thank you very much." The reporter sounded sincere.

The judge rose stiffly. He stretched, strode briskly to the door, standing with one hand on the knob. "I've some calls to make. I'll be back in an hour, or so." He puffed his cheeks, regarding the newsman soberly. "Try to retain an open mind, Barry," he said as if in afterthought. "Do try."

The door eased shut. The newsman was alone. He eagerly fingered the first taped tab, then lifted and folded back a thick sheaf of early pages. At the top of the facing sheet was a heading written in precise cursive:

Site VII, Luna—26 August, 2026

Here at last! Writing in cubicle after dinner. Years from now Geraldine & I will read diary together & chuckle. All a silly diary's good for anyhow.

Glad that hellish wait in quarantine & tedious crawler ride are behind me. Eighteen months of hard work & high bonus and I'll strut back to Gerry & Tommy boy with a bundle. Joy!

Met here by Dr. Lew. "Welcome to the forty-oners," says Lew [have no idea what he meant]. We invited the crawler crewmen in for coffee, then saw them off & Dr. Lew showed me around the station. The 600-meter instrument is the stopper, of course [staff calls it simply "The Rig", but actually it's the Karl G. Jansky Radio Telescope]. Be a helluva thrill working with it!

Discovered Dr. Lew stayed awake on presumption my arrival imminent [absolutely no communication with other lunar sites—a surprise]. Mr. Tcharoff now on watch—Dr. Butler quietly sleeping. They've been short-handed—three men on rotating eight-hour shifts these past months. I had imagined four men on station at all times.

Turning in now. Lew advises that Dr. Butler will wake me & give formal orientation when he goes on watch. Breaking in to routine should be fun. Pleasant dreams!

28 August

Too pooped to write yesterday. Flopped, slept through sacktime & most of recreation time. Last sunlight has left the Soviet Mountains, hence solar hash gone from sky & The Rig will be at maximum useful-

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ness this next semi-lunar. We're at 27° south latitude. Site III lies about 2,700 km northwest in *Mare Crisium*, while totally unexplored region around Sea of Moscow lies 1,400 km or so due north. Isolated. But that's why I'm here. Most lunar satellites are in equatorial orbits, below our short horizon. Farside is kept completely free of radio noise. Policy will pay off when [if] extra-human contact is made.

Met everyone save Mr. Tcharoff. Will meet him next week when Dr. Butler reschedules to include me on duty roster. Butler, nominal chief astronomer, is nearly fifty, has goatee, small gray eyes & a sort of pompous manner. He kindly commented on the photosculpt of Gerry & Tommy I brought along [should be praiseworthy—squandered a big chunk of bonus money on it]. Figurines are perfectly lifelike & edgelighted to make plastic all but invisible.

Checked out in pressure suit today. Temperature in surface dust: minus 87° F. & falling. Butler is laconic as hell, but very explicit when technical explanation is needed. Duties: [lunar day] maintain transmitter station; housekeeping & galley chores [light, thank God!]; meteoroid inspection of The Rig & transmitting antenna station & emergency power & life support systems [including our tiny crawler]. Lunar night: likewise on all counts save meteoroid inspection.

Sound ambitious? First tour showed that a lone man could easily handle things. Electronics are modularized—we have spares to burn. Our only exotic gear: ultra-parametric amplifier in receiving & The Rig's drive computer [moon's goofy axial wobble makes this "refinement" manadatory].

One other station: emergency communications—a joke! FM transmitter & vehicles in line-of-sight [within range] required to relay any/all messages Earthside. Butler says proper conditions have "happened" once in past fourteen years—during some emergency, luckily! Lunar orbital traffic is entirely below our horizon. We are as cut off from all things human as it is possible to be & still live. You must be here to appreciate this!

Questioned Butler about rotating to Site III now and then to talk home. He smiled, explained Ozma's severe financial straits. Such "cheating" [invalidating contract] would mean paying own Earth passage, forfeiture of bonus & allotments, reimbursing NASA for whopping insurance premiums, et cetera. I'd be in hock to NASA till baby Tommy or his sons found work!

Resupply crawler from *Crisium* each & every six months [want to check & make sure we aren't loafing]. Will bring goodies & mail. I'll have *beaucoup* letters for Geraldine by then. Oh, hell! Over two-one & knew my own mind, so

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they say. Next resupply date? Unknown. Arrival date a forbidden topic by mutual consent.

Did I mention that Dr. Lew has medical background as well as physics? Burst appendix would be a fearsome prospect out here otherwise.

29 August

Lone watch today. Butler seemed satisfied with my performance. Will switch staff to six hours watch, eighteen hours rest & recreation—much easier on everyone. Lew gave monthly physical exam after dinner & says I'm A-1. Can't help liking Lew. He's intelligent, infinitely patient, precise in movement & speech, with clear oriental skin & coal-black eyes.

Our music room's a luxury [especially for me]—the only compartment in the monastery hut kept at decent atmospheric pressure [for acoustic purposes since all hate wearing headphones]. When asked, Lew explained faint odor in music room as a combination of soupy air plus Mr. Tcharoff's pipe [he smokes in defiance of rules & Butler looks the other way]. Gathered Lew not at all fond of Tcharoff, but does admit he's a genuine music nut [sounds like someone worth knowing].

Also logged my first station entry today: transmitting Tau Ceti on 1,430 mHz band, just off natural frequency of neutral hydrogen. Star some ten light-years distant. May hear from them [?] in twenty years, who knows? Watched assembled platen on raster monitor: number theory, value of *pi—graphics* include schematic representations of solar system & bisymmetrical human form. The Rig receiving likewise [frequency of un-ionized hydrogen].

Letter to Geraldine, then sacktime. Tired tonight. Miss Gerry lots & lots.

30 August

Returned from watch today & heard someone singing snatches from Boris' death scene [pulls sharp after every second bar] & knocked politely to meet the singer. Gregor Tcharoff is straight from bad *opera bouffe*—taller, wider than life. sporting an auburn beard nesting birds might have built & [supposed] Rabelaisian gusto. He's really just a gruff kook who thinks his charisma sprouts from loud belches & a booming laugh, is easily amused [mostly by his own dialogue] & damned generous with advice on everything. Some fella!

It seems Butler had mentioned my photosculpt, & Tcharoff demanded to see it. He was overwhelmed. Geraldine, it developed, was the exact image of a lost love goddess whom he'd chased in Ankara twenty years ago, while Tommy was an absolute ringer for his favorite nephew back home in

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Vladivostok. Gregor has one standard joke in his repertory: the lunar farside is a sort of rare garden spot compared to Vladivostok. God, he may be right!

Over coffee he discoursed on Olbers Paradox, numismatics, homeopathic medicine, orchids, French opera, American baseball [about which he knows nothing] & a few topics I've forgotten. Whew!

He finally did explain something concrete: who the "Forty-oners" are. It seems they're us numbwitted jackasses who've agreed to eighteen months of living burial here on the forty-one per cent of Luna's wasteland never seen by Earth—and who, conversely, never see home & hearth hanging in the sky like a blue-silver Christmas tree bauble as it does over Site I & the other Earthside bases.

Tcharoff capped the evening with a yawn that exposed his entire trachea, gave me a friendly blow on the shoulder & ambled off to his cage to hibernate. He'll take *beaucoup* getting used to!

Watch tonight monotonous, lonely—six hours seem twelve or fifteen. From the control room The Rig's huge dish is limned in starlight above the rolling shoulders of the Soviets, but stars never crawl to westward as they do at home. The moon's a static, sterile dustball. Couldn't shake the idiotic notion that Earth did not exist, that this blasphemous place was all there ever was or would be. Silly! Nothing much to occupy my mind on watch. Might have spent more time listening to Gerry's misgivings about accepting this damn fool contract. Sure, a year and a half out here is better than three years wearing a uniform, & a conscription waiver went with the NASA contract.

Hell! Money's pouring in. I'll hang in there and get rich!

11 October

Skipped a couple of days since nothing new. Listened to several tapes again today: Sibelius, Offenbach, Prokofiev. Great quadraphonic tape library & excellent audio equipment. Friend Tcharoff, who pooh-poohs Sibelius as a composer of "effects" rather than serious music, stirred me to lively argument again. Bear's manner can get under anyone's skin. Watch it!

Not a helluva lot else to report. Tcharoff argued at dinner about Richard Strauss, but half-hearted, mopey. There seems to be a feud of sorts going between him & Lew, who's quiet, capable & self-contained, while Tcharoff's noisy, more or less capable & contained by nothing whatsoever including self. Butler remains aloof, which is slightly worry-making.

Dreaded going on watch—loneliness! Read for a time, but couldn't concentrate. Here two months or thereabouts, & it seems ten times that. Meals prepackaged,

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deep-frozen—quite good, but something is missing. Daydreams filled with Geraldine & Tommy. Miss Gerry terribly at times. *Most* times. Can't shake scary feeling something dreadful has happened to her. Would never know it here.

Turning in. Hope sleep comes easily tonight.

20 November

Good old 1,430,000,000 hertz for 27.321661 days this month. Listening same frequency. What else is new?

Thought up harmless rebellion. Will horse around with higher frequencies for a few watches. May transmit above 8,000 mHz when no one's looking [till Butler catches me] & listen same frequency. What fun!

Boredom supreme, & that shouldn't be. Intrinsic fascination with Ozma, really. Virtual certainty that modulated RF from "out there" is falling on every sub-stellar point of moon & planets. But at what frequency? That's the jackpot question—where to tune for the program from Oz?

Yesterday Lew & Tcharoff got into a blistering debate over why Ozma ever set up here in backwash of universe. Tcharoff, wild & woolly—but with a grain of an instinct for truth—insisted that ultra-parametric receiving equipment in any airless environs would have sufficed. Lew patiently pointed out that the original intent of Site VII was for an RF lab, that Ozma moved here with NASA's decision to fund The Rig's construction.

Hadn't known that, nor had Tcharoff, who was piqued-plus. He flared at Lew unmercifully, wilder than ever. He'd had a few, of course. Butler found & dismantled his latest vacuum still, but the Bear must've rigged another. His vodka tastes/smells like rancid castor oil, but high proof plus low p.s.i.g. oxy-helium in the hut turns him into a rather foulmouthed abominable snowman. What can the old man do, fire him? Joke!

On watch one whole cosmic year tonight. Really tough staying awake. Back in sack, most times, equally tough getting to sleep. Miss Geraldine beyond telling. Sit for hours staring into photosculpt. Do idiotic things—jam face up against photosculpt to null plastic & make Geraldine seem lifesize. Everything about Gerry is right & perfect. She could almost step out and . . .

19 January, 2027

Yesterday damned eventful. Shaken right out of the sack by a major quake [we get a steady diet of small tremors]. Tcharoff ooohed & aaahed & danced around like one round-eyed, scared Russian while Butler & Lew crammed selves into our tiny crawler to survey possible damage to station equipment.

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Got a scare call from them in ten minutes, suited up post haste with extra oxy bottles & survival kits. A large bolide had smashed into the crust less than 7 km from Site VII. New crater issuing gas & Butler agitated as an old hen.

Quick-marched upland beside Butler [in crawler] toward foothills, found some skimpy shade, watched & waited. What the hell for? If old Luna had decided to gobble up Site VII, we had all bought it.

A few lesser jolts, later. Gaseous issue dwindled, stopped. Trekked back, pooped, after fifteen hours in p-suits. The instant air spilled into inner lock chamber we heard the communications howler wailing & fell all over each other getting our fishbowls off. It was the resupply crawler from Site III—like Christmas cubed! They had been in the quake zone & were worried as hell when they couldn't raise us on radio.

All outside to greet them later. Bundles & bags of letters from Gerry. I have about one trillion carefully chosen words to ship home. Bedded down after celebration. Tcharoff uncorked some of his best [Butler smiled paternally & even had a snort himself]. Much later Tcharoff had to be "helped" to his sack after being dragged away from poor Lew. Gregor gets damned boorish on the sauce, specially to Dr. Lew. Very, repeat *very* nasty to Lew—the scene embarrassed the crawler boys. Puzzle. Lew does nothing obvious to antagonize the Bear.

Afterward read Gerry's letters thrice [little sheep, but what the hell]. Says she's lonely, otherwise fine. God in Heaven, if dear Geraldine knew the true meaning of loneliness!

In control room on watch when the crawler left. Hardest thing yet in this life for me was to see it shrink to a glittering speck in the pass northwest of station. I will not see, hear, nor feel contact with the rest of human society for another half-year.

22 February

Still here, Richard? Is the good old monastery hut still smelly as a locker room at the Y? A hut by any name smells just as sweat. Not bad! Pretty good poetry for a budding young scientist, huh? Still camped on Luna's backside earning my fortune. Backside, hell! There's a simpler word for it!

Vibrating in & out on twenty-one centimeters, if anyone cares [damned few do!] & still pouring that goddam Tcharoff into his sack & pulling him away from Dr. Lew. Some day he'll clobber Lew in one of his asinine rages. If he does he's in for some lumps of his own, the bastard! Butler's getting more concerned. Brilliant man, but damned ineffectual.

Crawler gone more than a month. Won't last my full hitch &

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know it thoroughly & completely. Next resupply crawler to Site III will have a deadhead aboard—Richard C. Dallin, dumb [but sane!] husband, father, & incipient pauper.

I've also been having grade-A nightmares. Wake dripping sweat after running for hours in p-suit, skirting craters & leaping craterlets, chasing the crawler. But the damned crawler keeps churning along just out of reach.

The other's *much* worse. Triumphant homecoming in taxi—dash madly up the stairs, ignoring apartment-house elevator, & unlock the door. There sits Geraldine, just as in photosculpt, holding baby Tommy on her lap, smiling her sunny smile.

I can't get in! Chilling wall of plastic between us! Beat & push & hammer fists raw, but I can't get in! Gerry & Tommy frozen ten paces away, not moving.

Wake screaming after that one. Rugged! Meaning to talk to Lew about myself again—headaches, lapses when I do nothing but worry. Going thru senseless motions here. Must get to Site III—& home!

28 February

Third of hitch gone—two-thirds to go. Aimless existence from day to day to day. If not for music room, I'd be in a real tailspin. Go there every rec period & drown in sounds. Tapes restore something precious as food, sleep, or . . . No, I must not even think about that.

Read some Shakespeare yesterday—he put it neatly:

When griping griefs the heart doth wound,
And doleful dumps the mind oppress;
Then music with her silver sound,
With speedy help doth lend redress.

Twenty-one centimeters [both ways] & Tcharoff badgering Lew constantly. I'd like to help Lew. But, how?

3 March

Sick—gawdawful headaches and drowsiness. No watches during past two days. Lew gave me onceover. Thinks problem psychosomatic & gives therapy in form of encouragement—how he supposedly felt likewise the first few months. Gallant lie, but Lew's a great guy.

Don't understand it—four of us all healthy. Can't infect each other with something exotic way out here [moon's controlled indoor environment notoriously low in bacteria count, perhaps the healthiest place of all human habitation]. Crawler's been gone too long for incubation of anything infectious from crewmen.

Better straighten self out!

15 March

Tragedy—Gregor Tcharoff is dead!

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Happened while I was in sack, Butler on watch. Lew & Gregor obviously had violent argument leading to blowoff in dining room. Butler came into hut for coffee, found Tcharoff with carving-knife wound in abdomen. Still breathing, but blood, blood everywhere. Lew unconscious on floor. Overturned table, chairs. Room wrecked.

Wakened by Butler immediately. The old man's beside himself. Lew still unconscious [we were afraid to move him]. Tcharoff's breathing stopped at 1950 hours GMT. Had disinfected wound, controlled bleeding & administered plasma from Lew's infirmary. All we could do, I suppose. But not enough.

Butler fed emergency distress tape to FM link, but chance of spacecraft in line-of-sight [within range] vanishingly small. I don't like Lew's look—comatose, breathing shallow, pulse weak & irregular. Lack of knowledge how to help is killing him. Butler believes basal skull fracture from blow, possibly fall. Clot also possible. What to do?

17 March

I am alone!

Lew's pulse, respiration faltered 0415. Tried external heart massage & resuscitation. No response.

Butler left for automated Earthside radio relay station in the Sea of Smyth at 1500 hours after we placed bodies in service shed & evacuated air. Horrible thought!

Small crawler will need lots of luck to make it. Butler's been over lunarscape to Site III dozens of times, but never to Sea of Smyth. He should cover 1,800 km in ten days or so—the absolute range limit of our little crawler. If he makes it there'll be a ballistic shuttle from Site I on the ground here within hours.

If he doesn't . . .

[Undated entry]

Nightmares—afraid to sleep. Wandered around, looked behind all doors. No one else is here. Butler gone long time. Cried. Haven't cried since childhood. Couldn't stop.

Tcharoff & poor Lew in service shed—cold, shrunken mummies. All Tcharoff's fault because . . . 'Ware the Ides of March, Tcharoff!

All of them gone & I'm alone!

[Undated entry]

God help me! Woke trembling from nightmare & found it real. Filthy, unshaven for days—weeks. Trouble remembering things & scared!

Also hallucinations, or cruelest imaginable joke. Cleaned self up & inspected station by way of applying nature's therapy. Thoughts that Butler had maybe gotten through were reviving & refreshing. Tremendously stimulated by hopes of rescue.

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Checked tapes in receiving & heart damned near quit. The Rig has been reading a *modulated* signal for some time!

Don't trust my own judgement any more. Double-checked all, then checked again. The Rig has been receiving discrete source approximate line Gamma Ceti on 8,200 mHz. Checked, verified tapes. Line feed 16452 installed [don't recall putting it on]. Last entry in station log [Butler, 15 March] cites our old standby 11211 installed. Cannot explain any of it.

Put tape on scope & horsed around with it until heart damned near exploded!

Platen, when assembled, reads as follows—*clear English:*

STOP RF NOISE
INTERFERING VITAL
EXPERIMENT HAVE
MONITORED YOU
LONG AND PROMISE
CONTACT FUTURE IF
STOP OR PENALTY
MOST SEVERE OUT

All the goddam nerve!

Went through log for transmissions that frequency. Didn't think there would be any, but sure enough—8,200 mHz for a few watches when Butler's back turned. If there's a research vessel out there it's way to hell-and-beyond anything I've heard about. But any hope's better than none. They'll tune my distress call, crank their high-gain array around & relay Earthside. Discarded binary input to transmitter, voice-coded mayday tape & I'm on the air.

Hope again wonderful!

[Undated entry]

Weeks have passed. Modulated signal gone—abandoned me like all others. Mind's going soft—forgot they're way out in deep space. Headaches, lapses when I'm . . .

Need help desperately—*now.* Sending on FM link & 8,200 mHz SOS. Little hope.

[Undated entry]

Saw self in mirror just now & bawled. I'm a mess!

How long since strange contact? A dream? Didn't think to log it datewise. Barely remember & uncertainty damning. Not certain of anything. Have lapses into . . .

Not sure what to call it, but I'm afraid.

[Undated entry]

Sunset outside. Gerry & Tommy boy like the view. Hold them up to glareproof in control room & they love it.

Take them wherever I go now. Except for service shed. Must not go into service shed. Taboo!

If only I could be with Gerry & Tommy I'd be *so* happy.

[Undated entry]

Heartless bastards are complaining again about my call

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for help. I *need* help. If I irritate them enough maybe they'll come help me. Gerry thinks so. Tommy's too young to understand.

Playing music for them now. Lots of Sibelius & Stravinsky. *Rite of Spring* can be damned irritating—may jibe them enough to make them come help me.

If not, maybe they'll like the music & come anyhow. They seem closer somehow.

Sorry Tommy boy doesn't like Sibelius. Gerry does. So do I.

[Undated entry]

Khachaturian, Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov today—Russian kick honoring that bastard Tcharoff. Gliere, Moussorgsky to round it out. Played Sibelius' fine *Fifth Symphony* for them again, too. It's so appropriate, so filled with light & that exhilarating sense of freedom, life.

[Undated entry]

Copland, Vivaldi, Beethoven & Gluck today—a mixed bag. Gilbert & Sullivan for seasoning—Gerry loves the patter songs. They should appreciate Gilbert & Sullivan, too. Their English is flawless.

[Final undated entry]

Trimmed beard, groomed self. Must be presentable, look my best, my *very* best. Gerry, Tommy & I are ready.

Airlock cycling . . .

JUDGE DARRANANGA threw open the door to find the newsman standing at the window, soberly contemplating the flow of water traffic far below in the East River. "I have only a minute," said the judge. "The jury is balloting now. Tell me truthfully—were you impressed?"

"Beyond words!" The newsman's eyes were hollow. "There are several matters—I remember reading that Dr. Butler's body was later recovered."

The judge leaned on the back of a chair, rocking gently. "Heavy-handed irony," he said. "Dr. Butler's tiny crawler almost made it. It had tumbled down a talus slope bordering the Sea of Smyth just eighty-five kilometers from his objective. It was discovered by a returning selenographical team he had passed well within radio range when outbound. Dr. Butler rests near the lonely outpost that had been his charge for so many many years."

The reporter's nod was somber. "And Richard Dallin? What happened to him?"

Darrananga smiled thinly. "How casually you ask the question of questions, Barry. The facts are these: every automatic service device in the monastery hut was operating as usual when the resupply crawler from Site III made its routine call, though none of quadraphonic audio tapes normally stored in the music room, nor the

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radio telescope's monitoring tapes, could be found. Nothing else seemed disturbed. Every pressure suit was accounted for by serial number, while the pocked, eternally silent wilderness around and about the station has been scoured and searched time and time again."

The newsman grunted. He said nothing.

"Which leaves us to dwell upon the true enigma—the photosculpt," pursued Darrananga. "The diary itself, plus sworn testimony furnished by Geraldine Dallin and by the California company, Barron & Sons, Photosculptors, establish beyond reasonable doubt that only Mrs. Dallin and her infant son posed for the photosculpt on the day in question."

The newsman nodded.

"If so," said Darrananga in a solemn tone, "we are confronted with paradox. You have seen the photosculpt. Imprisoned in seamless, rock-hard acrylic resin, the six-inch figurine of Geraldine Dallin is seated in a cane-backed chair, smiling pleasantly, holding baby Tommy on her lap."

Scowling, Darrananga folded his arms across his deep chest. "And hunched behind them," he said, "one casual arm resting on his wife's shoulder, crouches the emaciated, soul-wrenching figurine of Richard Charles Dallin."

"I've seen," said the newsman, "but—"

"More concretely," said the judge relentlessly, "microscopic examination shows that individual skin pores, retinal eye patterns, each single strand of the subject's hair and beard are exquisitely detailed in a manner totally beyond present day photosculpture techniques."

"Penalty—most severe!" said the newsman hoarsely.

Darrananga became intent. "Was that really the case? Don't leap to conclusions, Barry. Was indeed the 'penalty most severe'—or does compassion take forms as yet undiscovered? Either way, Richard Dallin is, in a sense, where he longed so desperately to be."

A light tap on the door caused the judge to lift his eyes expectantly. "Come in."

A bailiff poked his head in long enough to say, "Jury's back in the courtroom, your honor. The foreman says they've reached a verdict."

"Thank you, Carl." Darrananga donned his robes, his manner preoccupied. He spent a moment or two adjusting the parliamentary wig, then asked, "Did you hear him? 'The jury's reached a verdict,' he said. I wish to God it were that simple!"

"Amen," the newsman said.

Darrananga sighed. "I think Richard Dallin's jury will be out for some time. *Quite* some time." He made ready to leave, turning at the door with a curious light in his eyes. "Perhaps until the music from those missing tapes comes back to us from the stars." ★

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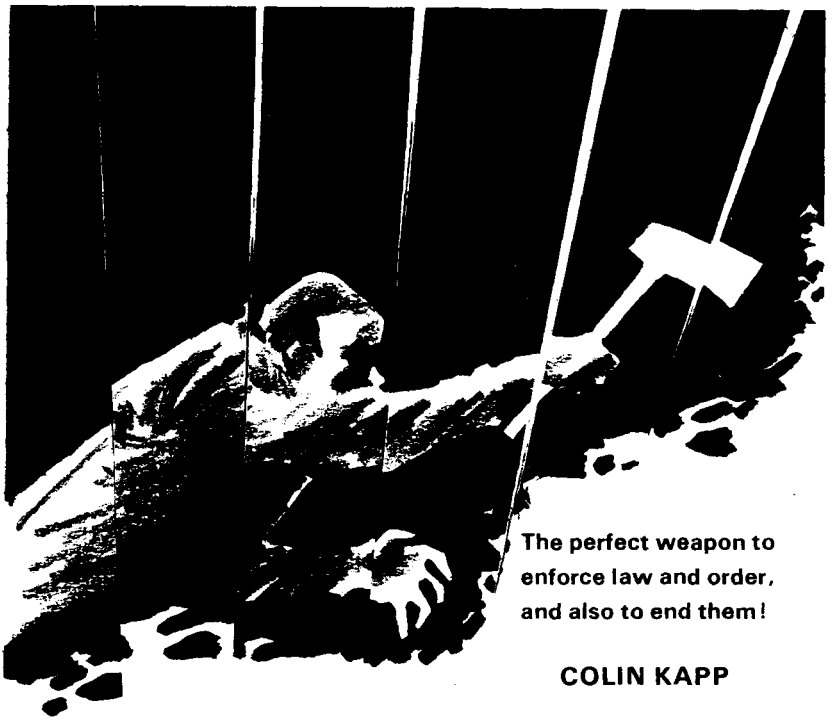

The perfect weapon to enforce law and order, and also to end them!

COLIN KAPP

CRIMESCAN

Pennal

BEFORE her the narrow sandy path rose steeply to the crest of a bank. Beyond the rise the huge red segment of the setting sun painted the leaves a golden red and made even the dancing gnats glow with a brazen fire. Droplets from earlier rains still glistened on the ferns and freshened the air.

The birds in the nearby trees were gathering for the night. Their songs fell sharp and melodious on the still air. Topping the ridge, the girl turned her face toward the sun's last warmth, her eyes nearly closed as she savored this moment of almost perfect communion with nature. Impulsively she kicked the sand in the path, sending it spurting ahead of her, the grains glowing as they were caught by the golden light.

The man let her pass a few yards. He had judged his position to a

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nicety. The bushy niche in which he hid was already covered by the evening shade. So careful was his step as he came up behind the girl that his movements were virtually noiseless. The girl herself knew nothing of his presence until the short axe descended on the side of her slim, white neck. She had no time even to scream.

Abruptly the half-orb of the sun assumed a more sinister symbolism. Caught in the grip of bloodlust, the man struck again and again, following his victim to the ground while continuing to strike at her with the short axe. The sight and the feel of the first blows he had struck seemed to excited him further. He appeared seized by a terrible passion which took a long time to find fulfillment.

Finally the passion was spent. He stepped back and examined the butchered mess, seeming only now to realize that this dead and horrifying thing on the path had scant moments earlier been a living, breathing, human being. Somehow a blood-wet axe was in his hand—he stared at it—and his arms were shiny and sticky with gore.

A DISTANT sound carried on the still air seemed to make him wary. Other people were about on this part of the heath and might be coming this way. He tore handfuls of grass off the adjacent bank and wiped away the worst of the blood from his arms. The axe he threw strongly but carelessly into a clump of trees to the left of the path. He watched it spin away, looking relieved. Thousands of people had axes like that. He no longer possessed one.

Another sound, nearer this time, made him start. He searched around accusingly, as if suspecting that he was being watched. He located no one, but a premonition seemed to him that he would be unwise to stay. The sun had nearly set and his choice of path through a line of trees behind the bank threw him immediately into a region of dimness. The path was twisting and winding, but the soft ground underfoot left few footmarks and returned no noise as he ran. Only the little plank bridge across a ditch made a sound, but this was lost under the great canopy of leaves above.

Emerging on a main path he slowed to a walk so as not to attract attention. Fortunately the dusk was now well advanced and the path was empty. Across a short stretch of open ground a car was waiting, hidden behind the bushes and out of sight of the road. He reached the car with open relief, took a back route winding away through the country lanes. He only emerged into street-lit areas when passing through a town. Knowing that his bloodstained clothes and arms would not stand close inspection, he was careful to avoid any action that might have involved the interest of

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others. Finally he reached an expressway and drove fast toward home and safety.

Safely indoors finally, in a small suburban house far from the scene of the crime, he seemed arrested by the sight of himself in the mirror. A sick face peered back at him.

Tseudi

BEFORE her the narrow sandy path rose steeply to the crest of a bank. Beyond the rise the huge red segment of the setting sun painted the leaves a golden red and made even the dancing gnats glow with a brazen fire.

"Camera on."

Droplets from the earlier rains still glistened on the ferns and freshened the air, emphasizing the sweet scents of the vegetation.

"Hold that in normal time, Tseudi. We're just coming to the critical point."

The birds in the nearby trees were gathering for the night. Their songs fell sharp and melodious on the still air. Topping the ridge, the girl turned her face toward the sun's last warmth, her eyes nearly closed as she savored this moment of almost perfect communion with nature.

"Can you move the lens in closer, Tseudi? We need all the detail we can get."

Impulsively the girl kicked the sand in the path, sending it spurting ahead of her, watching the grains glow in the twilight's golden light.

"You won't get a much better view than that," said Tseudi.

The prowler let the girl pass a few yards. He had judged his position to a nicety. The bushy niche in which he hid was already covered by the evening shade. So carefully did he step as he came up behind the girl that his movements were virtually noiseless. The girl herself knew nothing of his presence until the short axe descended on the side of her slim, white neck. She had no time even to scream.

Abruptly the red half-orb of the sun assumed a more sinister symbolism. Again and again the madman lunged, following his victim to the ground while continuing to strike at her with the axe. The horrible blows he had first struck seemed to induce into him a passion that took a long time to find fulfillment. Methodically he all but dismembered the body, apparently relishing the free flow of the blood and the sight of mutilated flesh and the feel of the axe against bone.

In the Eidochron control room the only sound was that of one of the technicians being sick.

When his passion was spent the madman stood back and inspected the butchery, seeing it as though for the first time. The axe in his hand and the blood glistening on his bare arms became objects of curiosity. From somewhere inside him a second personality seemed to have

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emerged and was staring with dawning fright and abhorrence at the atrocity before him. Yet the expression was entirely introspective—it held no concern or pity for the young girl hacked and mutilated on the path. The presence of the corpse seemed somehow an offense against the attacker—had it not been there, he would not have been at the scene, sweating and bloodied and very much afraid of being caught and blamed.

Tseudi's expression was one of fierce concentration as she fought with the complexities of the controls. Under such pressures, her own emotions had little time to surface. For this she was glad. She hated to faint in public.

For the madman escape became a predominant motive. A distant sound carried on the still air raised him to the instant alertness of a hunted animal. He tore handfuls of grass from the adjacent bank and wiped away the worst of the blood on his arms. The axe he threw strongly but carelessly into the clump of trees and bushes to the left of the path. He watched it spin away thankfully, as though its going materially lessened the chances of his being connected with the act of murder.

THE observers also watched the flight of the axe. Tseudi swung the whole field of vision so accurately that it covered the entire flight path of the weapon up to the time it disappeared into the trees.

"Run it back, Tseudi, and try to follow it in," said Coyne's voice. "That chopper was never found."

The screen blurred momentarily and the axe returned to the madman's hand. This time he threw it with the measured precision of slow motion. The axe moved in a leisurely arc, the view field following it at an apparent distance of a few meters. The field of vision rose high into the air, tracking the weapon over the bushes and down into the green cavity beyond. Abruptly the axe disappeared.

Coyne muttered something inaudible and Tseudi again stepped back the image and caught the axe in midflight to follow it down at only a tenth of normal-time rate. Soon the answer became apparent. In some past mishap or act of vandalism the top of a tall, slim, tree had been broken off completely. The living trunk had sprouted a cluster of new branches near the broken crown, but within these the main trunk was deeply split. By sheer accident the axe had entered and lodged within the crevice. The protruding handle was indistinguishable from the small branches from a half-meter's distance and its height was a good five meters from the ground.

"Good work, Tseudi. The chopper's probably still up there. No one could ever have found it except by the purest chance." Coyne's enthusiasm somehow never ruffled his

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persistent calm. "Let's go back and see what happens to our friend."

There was another step-back of slightly longer duration. The madman again watched the axe spin away.Sound again caused him to start and he glared fearfully around the clumps of bushes as though he suspected the presence of somebody close by. His gaze finally came to rest accusingly in the direction of the Eidochron quasi-lens, though he could not possibly have seen it. This was a common experience for the Eidochron team and appeared to relate to some latent sixth-sense in some human brains for which there was, as yet, no scientific explanation.

Then the fellow began to run. His direction took him along a twisting, wooded path already shaded under the last splash of the dying sun. Tseudi's nimble fingers deftly turned the field of view to the new direction and tried to follow his progress at normal-time rate. Such were the technical and manipulative difficulties of this maneuver that nobody blamed her at all when the sortie was halted with the field of view showing only a leafy treetop caught in the final instants of sunset.

Tseudi tried to relocate her quarry from this vantage point by scanning down through the branches, but either the madman had changed his course or his running figure could not be resolved by the Eidochron lens in the low level of available light. Resignedly she stepped back the time scan to a point where he had been fully in view, then tracked him in extended time around a serpentine series of bends, across a plank bridge and finally to where his path was intercepted by a second track. As she had guessed, he had indeed changed his course and was now making in the direction of the main road. In a couple of minutes he was out of the woodland and crossing the open heath. Tseudi's job here became easier, because she could let him walk well ahead, then catch him up with a straight sortie, which the computers could handle without her intervention.

Soon she could see the car toward which the man was heading. It was parked behind a hedge, clear of observation from the road. Tseudi ran the quasi-lens ahead and circled the vehicle so that Coyne could acquire all the photographs and details he needed for identification. As the madman reached the car she froze his image in order to confirm that he was indeed the girl's attacker. The blood on his arms and clothes and the weird expression in his eyes left no doubt that he was the same man. They now had his likeness, the whereabouts of the elusive weapon and some details about his vehicle. They still needed his address and his name.

HIS driving was fast and erratic, but not sufficiently to arouse

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the attention of other road users or the police. As darkness fell, Tseudi had virtually nothing to guide her other than the dim tail-lights of the car as it raced along the park lanes. Frequently she had to resort to a closeup of the vehicle time-frozen into stillness in order to ascertain that she was still following the right one. As they reached a town the street lights made identification easier and it was possible to follow the car by sight alone despite the increase in traffic. Beyond the town they met a limited-access expressway, again unlit for its major portion. Here, among the weaving pattern of taillights moving from the slower to the fast lanes and back, Tseudi lost her quarry completely.

Again and again she stepped back in time to where the vehicle had entered the expressway and tried to follow it through. The complexity of the traffic pattern continued to baffle her and she finished following some wrong vehicle. Coyne, however, was equal to the situation. By careful calculation he stepped the Eidochron forward in time while Tseudi stationed the view field at each exit ramp in turn to cover the period when their quarry was most likely to emerge if that was the route he had chosen. At the fifth attempt their vigil was rewarded. Clearly identified, the murderer's car left the highway at the point they were watching and Tseudi easily swung the field to follow it as it slowed for the side roads.

Then followed a jumble of suburban streets, which the driver obviously knew well. Occasionally Coyne would ask for the tracking to be suspended while he searched for roadnames and marked out the route on his maps. Finally they followed the car into a small outhouse garage where the murderer, now looking tired and sick, left it and walked to an adjacent house.

The insubstantial quasi-lens followed inquisitively through the wall. The house was old and poorly decorated inside, but it was tidy enough and its order showed strongly the touch of a feminine hand. It was obvious, however, that at this moment the murderer was its sole occupant. He stopped in front of the tall mirror in the foyer and examined his appearance with horror, apparently haunted by the anguished eyes staring back at him from the blood-speckled pallor of his face.

Uttering a low moan, he began work to repair his appearance. His first action was to strip and take a bath. Then, wearing fresh clothing, he picked up his soiled garments and dumped them in a bath of warm water with an overdose detergent. His shoes could not be similarly cleaned—these he opted to drop into the solid-fuel burner in the kitchen. Having progressed this far, he went out again into the

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darkness with several buckets of warm water which he poured over the plastics cover of the driving seat on the car. Apparently satisfied that he had removed all traces of the crime, he returned to the lounge and sat leafing abstractedly through a pile of magazines for some thirty minutes before he went to bed.

"Now we have the where," said Coyne. "All we need now is the name."

Tseudi deftly time-stepped through to the next morning and focused on the doormat. Finally some letters were delivered through the letterbox. Fortuitously both of these fell faceup. One was addressed to Mrs. Edith Pennal, the second to Roger Pennal, Esq. The first was set aside on the shelf when the murderer came down in the morning. The second one he opened.

"Need any more?" asked Tseudi Hyde. Her usually trim brow was deeply furrowed. The strain of the precise and prolonged operation had left her limp.

Coyne turned up the lights and shook his head. "No, I think that's all we need. That was a very good run, Tseudi."

SHE closed down the control panel in front of her and the image of Pennal's doormat faded from the screen. At her side Coyne was still watching the fading image, his calm face full of intelligence and comprehension. Tseudi turned.

"Would you mind if I handled the police contact on this one, Michael?"

"Of course not. You know the routine. But you'll do it tomorrow, not tonight."

"Why not tonight?" The condition surprised her.

"Because you're tired and could easily give too much away. And because you've become emotionally involved. You identified with the victim and that colored your reactions throughout the rest of the operation."

"I thought you said it was a good run."

"One of the best ever—that's how I know how involved you were. You weren't working to establish the truth, Tseudi—you were working for revenge. You achieved a four-dimensional fix on a target moving at a fast transit rate and you did so with the ease other people drive a car. It wasn't the Eidochron that followed Pennal back to his house—it was Tseudi Hyde making like an avenging angel."

His quiet humor brought a tired smile from her, soon overlaid by a sober consideration.

"What will happen to Pennal? Life imprisonment?"

"At a guess—he'll be found unfit to plead. But if he does stand trial the police may find the case difficult to prove. The crime took place a month ago remember. The blood on the axe handle was wet

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and may not have retained prints. He burned his shoes, so the footprint casts won't match anything they'll still be able to find—and there weren't any witnesses. If he managed to clean the car properly or has since disposed of it, the evidence will be dangerously thin. Unless his conscience gives him away it could be that the police won't get a conviction."

Tseudi was horrified. "But we saw him do it."

"Eidochron evidence would never be admissible in a court—and even if it were I couldn't make it available."

"Not even to put a monster like that behind bars?"

"Not even then, Tseudi. You know that. When we run the Eidochron we're uniquely privileged observers of the human scene. We also acquire a unique responsibility. The more you consider the ethics of Eidochron operation, the more terrible the responsibility becomes."

"Terrible?"

"Certainly. It can go back and see things hopefully forgotten. It can peer through walls into all the private moments of life. It can examine in detail all those things you never intended other eyes should see. The voyeur, the blackmailer, the jealous wife, the market-research man, the tax inspector and the ambitious politician would all use it if they could. That's why they mustn't ever have access to it."

"You're looking only at the debit side. Wouldn't justice be better served by having eyewitness access to the crime?"

"Justice, perhaps, but not humanity. Those controls under your fingers contain everything needed to support the most horrifying tyranny in history. Tales of Big Brother pale into insignificance compared with the researches an Eidochron could do on your life. Could you live, could you even think, never knowing whose eyes were watching, what notes they were taking, what conclusions, right or wrong, were being drawn?"

She looked at him steadfastly for a long moment, then smiled wearily.

"No," she said. "You're right, Michael. You always are."

"Then you appreciate why I won't let you use the results out of a spirit of revenge. Used only for establishing the truth, the Eidochron's a dangerous toy. Used as an instrument for profit or vengeance, it's a terrifying weapon. Go home and sleep on it, Tseudi. Call the police only when you feel able to give them a dispassionate account of the facts. The rest is up to them. We daren't get more involved than that."

Grattan

"THERE'S a girl on the line, Sir. Claims to have a

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message direct from Crimescan."

"Put her through immediately. Hullo? Chief Inspector Grattan speaking. Who is this please?"

"The name's not important, but the message is," said Tseudi. "I've Crimescan information concerning the Kingswood murder case."

"I'm afraid I must ask your name and address, madam."

"And I'm afraid you won't get it. What's got into you this morning? Do you want the information or not?"

"Certainly I want it. But if we need any verification it would be useful if we knew how to contact you."

"Forget it. Sorry if I've wasted your time."

"Don't hang up." Grattan's voice carried a note of genuine alarm. "If you feel you must remain anonymous I'll accept that. But give me the message."

"Keep her talking," said Spier's voice in his other ear. "Promise her anything you like, but keep her talking long enough for me to trace that call."

"You don't have any choice." Tseudi's voice returned again, slightly doubtful. "The information concerns the assailant of Patricia Wellman, the girl who was hacked to death near Kingswood. The name of her attacker is Roger Pellan."

"Hold for a second while I get another pencil. That's better—how do you spell it?"

"P-e-l-l-a-n. And his address is. . ."

Grattan took notes in immaculate shorthand, scowling disapprovingly at the recording and monitoring equipment that cluttered his office and at Spier, whom he disliked. Spier was busy attempting to trace the call.

"I've got that, Miss—er—"

"Stop fishing, Chief. I've no time for games. Listen carefully. The murder weapon was a short axe. Pellan threw it away at the scene of the crime. By accident it became lodged in the top of a broken tree. the chances are that it's still there."

"If it's there we'll find it. Anything else?"

"He wiped his arms on some grass from the bank, but the blood was the girl's, not his. There's a path through the trees right near the spot. He ran down it, then walked left along the major footpath, which is marked on the Ordnance Survey map. He had a car parked behind the hedge near the main road and he used it to drive himself home. As far as we know he encountered nobody who might be able to identify him."

"Except you?"

"Had I been there, Chief, you'd have heard about it as soon as I'd made the nearest phone—not a month later."

"I appreciate your point. Please continue."

"I'll give you details of the car. Registration number—"

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As he made the notes, Grattan turned to see how Spier was progressing. The latter was engaged in earnest conversation over his radio-telephone link. From his agitation it was obvious that he was nearing his goal but had not attained it.

Tseudi's voice continued. "The inside of the car received a lot of traces of the girl's blood from Pennal's hands and clothes. He went out again later and poured buckets of water over the seat. He soaked all his own clothes in biological detergent except for his shoes, which he burned in the kitchen stove. That's about all I can tell you."

"And you say there were no witnesses?"

"None who might have had cause to mark the occasion—and none who came near enough to make an identification likely. Someone named Edith Pennal also seems to be living at the house, but she was definitely not present on the night in question."

"Would you mind telling me how you know all this, Miss—"

"Sorry, but that's all the information I have to give. This conversation is ended."

AS THE line went dead Grattan stared speculatively at the receiver. *Whoever you may be, lady, take care of yourself. A lot of real mean people are after whatever it is you've got. . .*

Spier finished on the radio-telephone and came back with a sour look on his face.

"She got away, damn it. She was using a public phone in at the railroad station. The railroad police managed to get a man there within seconds of the call's ending, but she had vanished. We've sealed off the phone in case she left some fingerprints, but we've really not much to go on."

"Do you expect me to say I'm sorry?" asked Grattan critically. "Whatever Crimescan is, it does a real public service—it's given us invaluable leads on a number of tough cases. I don't see why you want to persecute the lady. It's not against the law to give information to the police, you know."

Spier scowled. "Was she one of your regular Crimescan contacts?"

"One of them, yes."

"Then why the hell did you go through that business of demanding her name? You must have known you wouldn't get it."

"It's standard police procedure," said Grattan obtusely.

"A warning, more likely. Something to make her wary."

"You'd find that difficult to prove."

"Look, you're not being very helpful. Your instructions were to give me the fullest cooperation. All I get from you is antagonism."

"I may have to cooperate," said Grattan. "But that doesn't mean I also have to like what you're doing. I don't know what you security

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people are up to and I don't think I'd care to know. In my book you're a lot of black bastards who seem to think they're above the law. But when one of your boyscout charades threatens to foul up the most valuable source of information I've got I definitely begin to see red."

"That's your bad luck!" said Spier, unimpressed. "I've got a job to do and not you nor anybody else is going to get in the way. Try another funny trick like that and I'll break you, Grattan. Now let's play back the recording of that call and see if we can get more ideas."

"What sort of ideas?"

"Ideas like who this girl and her friends are, where they operate from and exactly what it is they use to get information that isn't possible to get."

"I still don't see what Crimescan has to do with security."

"You're being remarkably thick, Chief. Take this case alone—the girl says that Pennal went home and washed his clothes in biological detergent. Was she actually there? Doubtful, because girls don't usually associate with a man who's just chopped up one of them. So how the hell could she have known what type of detergent he used?"

"I honestly don't know."

"Then I'll tell you. They've got something that gives them the ability to see through walls. Think of the fun you could have with a gadget like that in offices or around a government security establishment. Think of the profit you could make. What price would you put on official secrets?"

"Have you any reason to believe Crimescan has been used in that way?"

"No. But would you care to bet it won't be? Not knowing what it is or who controls it?"

"I'd be most unhappy right now—if I were in power and had something to hide. Alternatively I might decide that duplicity in government had become outmoded and root for the formation of the first truly honest administration of law and order in history. I always did have the feeling that government secrecy is directed more against the people than against a possible enemy."

Spier's reply was preluded by a look of sheer malice.

"There's also a second implication. They couldn't have known the murder was going to happen. They must have started from the murder as an existing fact and viewed it retrospectively. In short, they can locate a point in time as well as space. They can not only see what a man's doing, but also everything he's done. For all I know they may be able to see into the future as well."

"Clean living is the only safeguard," Grattan said, a hint of mischief about his lips. "But there's nothing new about it. The gypsies have been playing around with the

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past, present and the future since time began."

"This is different. I suspect a technological approach, one that obviously works."

"Then would it be automated fortune-telling you're trying to sell me?"

"Grattan, if you needle me any more I'll crucify you! I'm trying to get it through your thick skull that these people, whoever they are, are a damn sight too clever. There isn't a secret in the country they couldn't find if they wished. And that's far too dangerous a power to leave floating around in the hands of nameless private citizens, no matter how well intentioned."

"Meaning that if you government people acquire it, it's perfectly right for you to use it to inspect the lives of the populace—but if there's the remotest chance that a taxpayer might use it on you we have a national disaster?"

"You're beginning to get the point, chum."

"And you're beginning to make my stomach crawl. Patricia Wellman was hacked to pieces by a maniac. It was senseless brutality without even rape as a motive. Unfortunately we've never been able to trace her assailant. He's free to strike down somebody else at any time. Now that Crimescan has given us his name we can see that doesn't happen."

"You make my heart bleed. So a girl was chopped up—you're talking about the death of an individual. I'm talking about the security of the whole damn country."

"You're dealing in abstractions, Spier. My concern is with the facts of a murder that's been committed—and the possible prevention of another. Crimescan is helping to uphold the law and making the world a safer place to live in. For those of you who work above the law I've neither time nor sympathy. God help the lot of us if things ever start going all your way."

Spier

RATHER than risk a disturbance of the evidence, it was decided to cut the top off the tree. Spier's face had been peculiarly impassive as he watched the cradle of the hydraulic hoist swing the saw into position. Now, as the broken treecrown was carefully lowered to the ground and the axe itself became visible, even he could not suppress a marked reaction. Grattan's photographs of the atrocity had made their point.

Soon the police departed with their trophy. Major Spier remained, walking thoughtfully through the area, trying to analyze the nature of the device for which he was looking. It required vision without presence—vision with retrospective ability. Neither seemed conceptually impossible. High-definition electronic-scan radar could produce a reasonable

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image from a moderate distance and any form of recording held the potential for retrospective replay. The ingenious part of Crimescan would be the focusing and the method of regressing the focal point back through time without the necessity of having recorded everything beforehand.

Spier shrugged and went back to his car. The things being done with lasers and electron optics in advanced research laboratories never ceased to amaze him, even though he had an advanced degree in physics as a necessary part of his qualifications for technical security projects. He knew instinctively that his analysis of the mechanism of Crimescan was naive and imprecise, but a fundamental tenet clung in his mind. Data transmission required power—and the greater the number of "bits" of information transmitted and the greater the distance, the greater the power requirement had to be. Furthermore, if the data were acquired by the process of interrogating a passive element and reading the reflection, then the primary transmitter would need to radiate a very significant amount of energy.

With this in mind he began a search that took him through doors only his high security standing could open—into various electronic research and communications laboratories, monitoring stations and radar establishments. Using as a starting point the dates of several major crimes that had been the subject of Crimescan activities, he was looking for records of significant transmissions of energy at times corresponding to those of the crime or at times slightly preceding Crimescan's reports to the police. He drew a blank. If such transmissions had existed they occupied parts of the radio spectrum not normally being monitored. Most of his contacts, however, were of the opinion that it would be possible to detect such transmissions if it were known when they were likely to occur.

Spier was not a man who believed in chance. He laid his plans with the greatest care. The weak link was Chief Inspector Grattan and Spier set out in person to convert him to the cause. Grattan had already been advised to offer the fullest cooperation—word had come down to him from the highest levels.

Grattan greeted Spier dourly and listened to his proposals without enthusiasm.

"Now let me get this straight, Major Spier. If I understand you correctly you want me to set up all the trappings of a major investigation of a murder that didn't actually happen."

"I didn't say it won't happen. I'm merely saying that what you will see will be something that has been staged. We'll present you with an apparent case that will meet the requirements for headlines—the victim, the murder weapon and

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everything needed to make it look authentic. All you have to do is fail to solve it. We want Crimescan to have a go at it. And when they do we'll have our detectors waiting for them."

"But I've already solved it," said Grattan testily. "You're responsible—and I can think of nothing I'd enjoy more than getting you put away for life."

"I need hardly tell you the case would never get to court."

"Where would you get this—ah—victim?"

"That's my worry, not yours. All we need from you is the touch of realism that will bring Crimescan into action."

"You mean to tell me you'd actually take a life in order to trap a public benefactor?" Grattan was incredulous.

"You know how highly security rates possession of Crimescan. We have to get hold of it somehow. It's nothing to you where the body comes from or where it goes."

"That's where you're wrong. I care very much where it comes from. I wouldn't be a good policeman if I didn't. If you've got the sort of immunity that places you above moral law as well as above the law of the land I suggest that you appeal to the Almighty for help—not me."

"Don't try to fight me, " said Spier. "You're going to help me—and you know damned well why."

"Oh, that? The resignation bit? Well I've certainly no intention of resigning just to suit your convenience. If I'm disciplined for disregarding 'friendly' advice from upstairs—that's a different matter. Other people, too, will then have their consciences to examine."

"Then you won't cooperate?"

"I'll treat a murder case as a murder case. If I can solve it, I will. If I run out of luck—then I'll hope that Crimescan will step in with some answers. I'll go no farther than that."

"That's not good enough," said Spier. "I'll have to work with somebody more amenable. You'll find your duties have been reorganized, Chief. I advise you to take the hint and resign. Otherwise you might find the going rather tough."

"I'll see you in hell first," said Grattan.

Coyne

PIETR LAZLO, unshaven for three days and sought for his gambling debts for ten times longer, reacted to the knock on his door as a man with less on his mind might react to the finding of a poisonous snake in his bed. Instantly alert and trembling violently, he searched around for a makeshift weapon or an avenue of escape. He found neither.

"Open up, Lazlo. We know you're there."

"No!" Lazlo's voice came out as a hysterical squeak. "I need more

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time. Maxine promised me."

"Maxine's given you all the time you're going to get, Lazlo. Now she wants blood. Are you going to open this door or do we have to kick it down?"

"For God's sake—I'll get the money! I promise I'll get the money."

"Where from?"

A blow on the door splintered the wood around the lock. Wildly Lazlo scanned the room for any conceivable means of defense. An ancient marble-topped washstand seemed to offer the only chance. Fortunately the marble was no longer secured to the wood and the heavy slab came away easily in his frantic hands. He stationed himself behind the door, the slab raised above his head.

The door flew open with a crash. There was a blur of somebody following it rapidly into the room and Lazlo struck with all his strength. The descending slab caught the intruder squarely on the head and crushed his skull, killing him instantly. As he fell to the ground a gun clattered across the floor. Lazlo dived low and followed the gun, recoiled like a cobra, the weapon in his hands.

Somebody shouted a hoarse warning. As Lazlo turned to fire, two bullets from outside the door dropped him even as he pulled the trigger. His shot went wide and buried itself in the wall. A brief buzz of argument became audible outside the apartment, was followed by the sound of a panicky exodus. From a lower stair landing came the discernible words: "It was self-defense—him or me. Maxine shouldn't have let that gunhappy bastard come along. It had to cause trouble—" The slam of the front door returned the house to silence.

Tseudi froze the action at that point and looked at Coyne for guidance. Coyne was leafing through a file of newspaper clippings with a frown of mystification.

"I wonder what's going on, Tseudi. We know Pietr Lazlo was shot, but there's no mention in the press of the man who had his head crushed. There's been some suppression of information here.

"A D-notice?" asked Tseudi, referring to the news-media censorship document.

"Possibly. Though I don't see any political or security implications here. I suppose it could be that the authorities knew who the other dead man was and had reasons for not wishing him implicated. But why suppress only half the story and not all of it? Back track on him, Tseudi, and let's see where he came from. It could be you were right—that Grattan was trying to warn us."

"Right." With nimble fingers she reversed the time sense, and after an appropriate delay the body sprang back from the floor, the marble slab was lifted away from his repairing skull. He blurred

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backward and out. The door closed and repaired its splintered woodwork. Tseudi swung the Eidochron lens through the door and surveyed the faces of the men on the landing.

COYNE held up his finger for a momentary halt. Tseudi froze the image and moved in for a close up of the man who had never been reported dead.

"Mean anything?" she asked.

"The face is vaguely familiar, but I can't place him. Certainly he had nothing to do with gambling. I'd swear I've brushed shoulders with him at technical conferences—but I don't see how he comes to be in this sort of company."

Tseudi concentrated then, intent on the difficult manipulation of following three men down the stairs through all the three physical dimensions while still holding reversed normal-time congruency. Outside the house, where the men drove off backward in a car, she had to slow the image considerably in order not to lose track of them in the traffic. Fortunately this time she was able to track the car by daylight.

up near a small drinking and gaming club and all three men went in backward. Tseudi was just about to make the quasi-lens follow when their particular quarry came out alone, entered the car again and backed down the street. His retreat took him not home, as Tseudi had anticipated, but finally into the gates of an electronics research establishment.

This was the first time Tseudi had ever heard Coyne swear.

"What does it all mean?"

"It's a trap, Tseudi. And we're in it. I've just remembered who our mysterious body is. He's Major Spier—a scientific security man. He's usually behind the scenes at international conferences and he's made it possible for a number of scientists to defect from behind the Iron Curtain."

"Then what's he doing in this instance?"

"Provoking a murder incident—with a top electronics radiation lab primed to locate our Eidochron transmissions. A curious touch of poetic justice that—he got himself killed in the process."

"Hence the D-notice;" said Tseudi. "But that was a month ago. If they had been able to locate us they would surely have been here long ago."

Coyne shook his great, gray head. "No. At that time they would have been able to detect only the eido-refringent lens response—and that would have given a signal at the scene of the crime and everywhere we've traveled this morning. They could have been certain that Crimescan would investigate, but they couldn't have located us until now. Our danger is the interrogation transmission we're putting out at this moment. How long have we been on the air?"

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"Ninety-six minutes all told."

"More than enough time for them to have gotten a fix on us. I'm sorry, Tseudi, but this is the end of Crimescan. The game's over."

HIS face registered no particular emotion as he reached past Tseudi's shoulder to press the button marked DESTRUCT. Whatever bitterness he might have felt was swamped by the generous tide of his own maturity.

"It's a pity it had to come to this. Twenty minutes, Tseudi, to get clear. There won't be much damage outside the building, but inside there'll be very little left."

Tseudi began to close down the control panel, but Coyne stopped her gently.

"Let it run. It can make no difference now."

He slipped into the control seat and began resetting the controls for a forward scan of their own location only an hour away in future time. Tseudi seized her handbag, gathered her coat and made ready to depart with the other technicians. Then, on seeing Coyne still seated at the controls, she came back to him.

"Aren't you coming, Michael?"

"I'll be leaving shortly," said Coyne. "First I have to make sure that there'll be nothing left after destruct that would enable the Eidochron ever to be rebuilt. It's a terrible toy we've been playing with, you and I. Something I can't let fall into the hands of less responsible people. You run along, Tseudi—and thanks for everything!"

Finally alone, Coyne carefully scanned the charred and blasted wreckage of the equipment rooms after destruct, nodding with approval as he saw the destruction had been as absolute as he had planned. The twin elements of his genius, the eidorefringent lens projectors and the time-scanning grids, were smashed beyond the possibility of recovery or analysis of their function. Apart from confirming that the device once had existed, the ruins of the Eidochron would contribute nothing to anyone wishing to recreate the process. Even the microfilmed drawings and documents had been vaporized by the aluminothermic fuses built into the storecase and the cabinet itself was reduced to a block of metallic slag.

One possibility remained—one factor that even yet held all the information necessary to rebuild the Eidochron from first principles. For a long while Coyne could not locate what he was looking for. He gave a sigh of relief when he found it—the image of his own body dead among the ruins of the control room. He sat back in the chair and waited quietly for the installation around him to disintegrate. He found some consolation in the fact that even in death his image had still been softly smiling. ★

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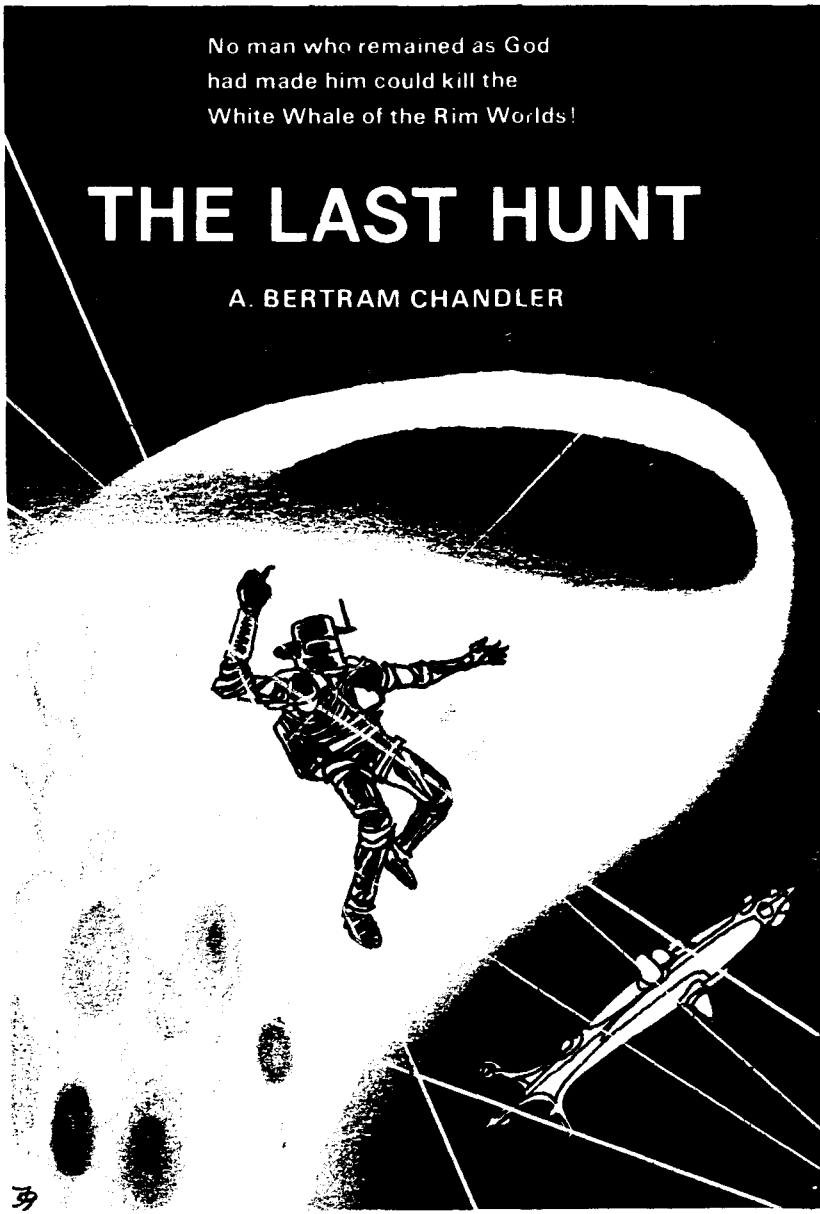

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I

GRIMES stood at the wide window of his office, which overlooked the Port Forlorn berthing apron, watched the starship *New Bedford* coming in. She was a stranger to the Rim Worlds. According to Lloyd's Register she was owned by the Hummel Foundation of Earth. The Foundation, Grimes knew, had been set up for the intensive study of xenobiology—its Interstellar Zoo, covering hundreds of square miles of Australia's Central Desert, was famous throughout the galaxy. Almost equally famous was *New Bedford's* master, Captain Haab. He was both master astronaut and big game hunter—an unlikely combination, but a highly successful one.

And what was Captain Haab doing out on the Rim?

Grimes could guess.

Slowly *New Bedford* dropped down from the clear sky—her arrival had coincided with one of Port Forlorn's rare fine days. She gleamed dazzlingly in the bright morning sunlight. As she gradually lost altitude the beat of her inertial drive rose from an irritable muttering to a noisy, unrhythmic drumming, frightening the snowbirds—which at this time of the year infested the spaceport—into glittering, clattering flight.

The commodore picked up binoculars, studied the descending ship. He already knew that she was modified Epsilon Class, but was interested in the extent of the modifications. She looked more like a warship than a merchantman, the otherwise sleek lines of her hull broken by turrets and sponsons. Most of these seemed to be recent additions. She must have been specially fitted out for this expedition.

No doubt, Grimes thought, Captain Haab would be visiting him as soon as the arrival formalities were over and done with—it would be more of a business than a courtesy call. But everything was ready. The files of reports were still in Grimes' office, the spools of film, the three-dimensional charts with their plotted sightings and destructions. If Haab wanted information—which he almost certainly would—he should have it.

New Bedford was almost down now, dropping neatly into the center of the triangle marked by the brightly flashing red beacons. Already the beetlelike ground cars of the spaceport officials—port captain, port health officer, customs—had ventured on to the apron, were waiting to close in. But Haab, with all the resources of the Hummel Foundation behind him, would have no trouble in obtaining inward clearance.

New Bedford was down at last. Her inertial drive complained for the last time, then lapsed into silence. A telescopic mast extended from high on her hull, at control

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room level, and from it broke out a flag that fluttered in the light breeze. It was not, Grimes realized, the houseflag of the Hummel Foundation, a stylized red dragon on a green field. This standard was white and blue.

Miss Walton, Grimes' secretary, had come to stand with him at the window. "What a funny ensign—what is it supposed to be? It looks like an airship, a blimp in a blue sky—"

The commodore laughed. "I think that the blue is supposed to represent sea, not sky. And that's not a blimp—"

"What is it, then, Commodore?"

"It could be a white whale," Grimes told her.

"CAPTAIN HAAB to see you, sir," announced Miss Walton.

Grimes looked up from his desk where he had been blue-penciling the stores requisition sent in by the chief officer of *Rim Percheron.* "Show him in," he told his secretary.

The girl returned to the office followed by Haab. The master of *New Bedford* was a tall man, thin, towering over the little blonde. There was an oddly archaic cut to his tightly fitting black suit, to his stiff, white linen and black stock. His face was gaunt and deeply tanned between his closely cropped black hair and black chin beard. His eyes were a startlingly pale blue. He walked with a peculiarly jerky motion and from his right leg came a strange faint clicking noise.

Grimes rose to his feet, extended his right hand. "Welcome to Port Forlorn, Captain."

Haab took the commodore's hand in his own almost skeletal claw. "Thank you, sir."

"Sit down, Captain. Tea? Coffee?"

"Coffee if I may, Commodore. Black."

"Will you attend to it, please, Miss Walton? Black coffee for two. And did you have a good voyage out, Captain?"

"A quiet voyage."

"First time I've seen anybody from the Hummel Foundation out here. Of course, we haven't much in the way of exotic fauna on the Rim. Not on the man-colonized planets, that is. Most of our animals were raised from Terran stock."

"I'm not concerned with any of the life forms actually on the planets, Commodore."

A grin softened Grimes' craggy face. "I can guess what you've come for, Captain—" Miss Walton brought in the coffee tray, set it on the desk. Grimes said to the girl, "Would you mind having the projection room ready? You know the films we shall want—those that the admiralty lent me."

"The ones shot on the Lorn-Llanith route, sir?"

"Of course."

"Very good, sir. Oh, would you

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mind if I asked Captain Haab a question?"

"Go ahead, Miss Walton."

The girl addressed herself to *New Bedford's* master. "I'm interested in flags, sir. What is the one that you have flying from your ship?"

Haab smiled thinly. "It's my own personal broad pennant. The Foundation allows me to wear it."

"But what is it, Captain?"

"A white whale," replied Haab.

"As I've already told you," grunted Grimes. "And now will you get those films ready?"

"And could you fill me in while we're waiting?" Haab asked Grimes.

"Of course, Captain. I'll start at the beginning."

"AS YOU KNOW," said Grimes, "we operate lightjammers on the run between the Rim Worlds and the Llanithi Consortium. The lightjammers are the only ships that can have their atomic charges reversed so that they can land on the anti-matter worlds without blowing themselves—and anybody else within ten thousand miles—to glory. The lightjammers had been running into trouble—a strange vessel kept appearing on a collision course, shoving them away to hell and gone off trajectory—"

Haab smiled. "You'll probably be hearing from the Rhine Institute about that. But the Hummel Foundation is concerned with living beings, not ghosts, not even such famous ghosts as the Flying Dutchman."

"Just as well. Since the navy started cleaning up the shipping lanes old Vanderdecken has been conspicuous by his absence. Maybe he's found a home on Atlantia. They still go in for sail in a big way there.

"Well, after the first reports came in I decided I'd better see for myself, so my wife and I took passage from Lorn to Llanith in *Pamir*. At that time it was thought that the Flying Dutchman was another lightjammer, a foreign ship snooping on our trade routes. But we had with us the Reverend Madam Swithin of the United Primitive Spiritualist Church, going out to Llanith as a missionary. Thanks to her we found out what the Flying Dutchman was and that Vanderdecken was warning us about something.

"So I grounded the lightjammers and sent a report to Admiral Kravitz, urging him to make a full-scale investigation. He did. Luckily our fleet was out on maneuvers at the time so it all fitted in with the war games that were being played. Instead of the usual Redland versus Blueland it was the armed might of the Confederacy versus the Menace from Intergalactic Space. Mphm."

Haab registered strong disapproval. "Not a hunt," he growled, "but a military operation—"

"Of course. If one of our light-

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jammers had run into a herd of those things—or even a single one—there would have been a shocking mess. Don't forget that the Erikson Drive ships, unlike the Mannschenn Drive jobs, remain in normal space-time while accelerating to the velocity of light and return to NST when decelerating. The energy eaters—"

"Is that what you call them?"

"What else? The energy eaters were a menace to navigation and they were dealt with as such."

"I still don't like it."

"You're not master of a lightjammer, Captain. Oh, all right, all right, you're a big game hunter as well as being a shipmaster. But the EEs don't have nice, horned heads that you can hang on the wall. They don't have pretty pelts that can be made into fireside rugs."

"I want a living specimen."

"I doubt if your marvelous zoo in Central Australia would be able to accommodate it."

"A zoo need not be on a planetary surface, Commodore. The plans for an orbital zoo have been drawn up, with lines of magnetic force among a grouping of small artificial satellites forming the bars of a cage. If I capture a specimen the Foundation will have everything ready for its reception when I get it back to Earth."

"*If* you capture a specimen. The navy's doing a good job."

Haab inhaled deeply from the villainous black cigar that he was smoking as a counter measure to Grimes' foul pipe. He withdrew the thing from his mouth and his right hand, holding it, rested on his knee. Grimes sneezed. There was more than tobacco smoke in those acrid fumes.

He said hastily, "You're setting yourself on fire, Captain."

The other man looked down at the little, charred circle in the cloth of his trousers, beat out the embers with his left hand.

Grimes said, "You must feel deeply on the subject. You didn't notice that you were burning yourself."

"I do feel deeply, Commodore. But this leg's prosthetic. I lost the original on Tanganore when a harpooned *spurzil* took retaliatory action. The Tanganorans fitted me out with this tin leg and, by the time I got back to Earth where I could have had a new flesh-and-blood one grown, I'd gotten used to it. In any case—I couldn't spare the time for a regeneration job."

"Tanganore? That's in the Cepheid Sector, isn't it? And what is a *spurzil?*"

"A sort of big armor-protected whale. White."

"And now you're hunting Moebius Dick himself."

"Moebius Dick, Commodore?"

"I thought that your private flag was supposed to represent the original Moby Dick."

"No. It represents the *spurzil* that took a piece of me. It's a re-

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minder to myself to be careful. But *Moebius* Dick?"

"Wait until you've seen the films, Captain Haab."

GRIMES sat with Haab in the darkened projection room and Miss Walton started the projector. Slowly the screen came alive and in it glowed words: OPERATION RIMHUNT. FOR EXHIBITION TO AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY.

The credit titles were succeeded by a spoken account of what was happening, by some quite good shots of lightjammers arriving at and departing from Port Erikson, by an excellent shot of *Herzogin Cecile* making sail. The voice of the commentator said, "But these ships, the pride of our merchant navy and the first vessels successfully to trade with the anti-matter Llanithi Consortium, discovered that all was not plain sailing." Grimes contrived to wince audibly. "A new menace appeared on the trade routes and only by taking violent evasive action were the lightjammers able to escape certain destruction."

"No mention of Vanderdecken," commented Haab.

"Our navy refuses to believe in ghosts," Grimes told him. "Their psychologists have a marvelous theory that the Flying Dutchman was no more than a projection of our own precognitive fears, a visual presentation of a hunch."

The commentator went on: "Commodore John Grimes of the Rim Worlds naval reserve—also astronautical superintendent of Rim Runners—was a passenger aboard the lightjammer *Pamir*. He was in her control room when the master, acting upon a hunch, trimmed his sails in order to make a large alteration of course to port—"

"I like that!" snorted Grimes. "I had to bully the stubborn bastard into making that alteration."

"—deciding that there must have been some unseen danger ahead of the ship, Commodore Grimes made a report to Admiral Kravitz, recommending that a thorough survey be made of the trade routes between Lorn and Llanith. At the time the fleet was out on maneuvers off Eblis and the frigates *Rim Culverin* and *Rim Carronade* were detached to carry out investigations in the neighborhood of Llanith."

The last shot of a lightjammer under sail faded from the screen, was replaced by one of a conventional warship proceeding under Mannschenn Drive, obviously taken from a sister ship. In the background glowed the warped, convoluted Galactic Lens, an oval of luminescence twisted through and into an infinity of dimensions. The outline of *Rim Culverin* herself was hard and clear.

"Arriving at the position in which, according to Commodore Grimes' report, the danger was thought to exist, *Rim Culverin* and

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Rim Carronade reduced to cruising speed and initiated a search pattern. Both vessels, of course, had their mass proximity indicators tuned to maximum sensitivity. Eventually a target was seen in the screens, the indications being that it was something extremely small, with barely sufficient mass to register. It must be pointed out, however, that collision with a dust mote at a speed close to that of light could have serious consequences—"

"How do your lightjammers guard against that?" asked Haab.

"We don't. Cosmic dust is something that we don't have any of out on the Rim."

"What about hydrogen atoms? Wouldn't they be as bad?"

"We don't have any of those either—or the operation of lightjammers would be impossible. But look!"

"—inertial drive only, *Rim Culverin* and *Rim Carronade* approached the target with caution. Radar had been put into operation when the ships made their reentry into normal space-time and proved more effective than the mass proximity indicator had been. The original target was resolved into a cluster of targets, each presenting an echo in the screen equivalent to that given by a small ship, such as a scout. Furthermore, as the range decreased to a hundred kilometers and less, the targets could be seen visually."

In the screen was what looked like a star cluster, bright against the intergalactic nothingness.

"The cautious approach was continued—"

The effect now was more like a swarm of fireflies than a star cluster. The points of light were in rapid motion, weaving about each other in an intricate dance. The ship from which the film had been taken was approaching the shimmering display—probably magnification was being stepped up at the same time. If it were not—then the approach was far from cautious.

Each of the dancing lights possessed a definite shape.

"Haloes," murmured Haab.

"Not haloes," Grimes told him. "Look more closely, Captain."

Nonetheless, haloes they could have been, living annuli of iridescence—but twisted haloes. As they rotated about their centers they flared fitfully, seemed to vanish, flared again.

"What do they remind you of?" asked Grimes.

"The antenna of a Carlotti beacon or transceiver," replied Haab after a moment's thought. "But circular, instead of elliptical—that's what I thought when I saw the stills that the Survey Service passed on to the Foundation. It's more obvious when you see the things in motion."

"In other words," said Grimes, "a Moebius Strip. But watch."

The voice of the commentator

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came up again. "*Rim Culverin* dispatched a drone to make a closer investigation—"

There was a shot of the little craft—a spaceship in miniature, bristling with a complex array of scanners and antennae—pulling out and clear from the parent ship. *Rim Carronade's* camera tracked her until she was too distant for details to be distinguished. Then this picture was replaced by the one seen by the probe's electronic eyes. The small unmanned craft was making a close approach to one of the whirling rings of light. The enigmatic thing was almost featureless, although flecks of greater luminosity on its surface were indicative of its rotation. It was a Moebius Strip made from a wide, radiant ribbon. It flared and dimmed like an isophase beacon with a period synchronized with that of its revolution. It could have been a machine—yet it gave the impression that it was alive. It filled the screen, spinning, pulsing—and then there was blackness.

The commentator said in a matter of fact voice, "The drone went dead. It had not been destroyed, however. Powerful telescopes and radar aboard both ships could still pick it up. But it was obvious that all its electronic equipment had suddenly ceased to function.

"It was obvious, too, that the cluster of mysterious entities was approaching the frigates at high velocity. Captain Laverton, aboard *Rim Carronade*, ordered a withdrawal from the scene. *Rim Carronade* and *Rim Culverin* proceeded west, first at normal cruising speed, then increasing to maximum inertial drive acceleration. But the hostile beings steadily decreased the range. *Rim Carronade* and *Rim Culverin* were obliged to open fire with their stern-mounted laser cannon—"

II

THE screen showed the false star cluster again, but its individual components were no longer dancing about each other, maintaining a globular formation—they were holding a steady trajectory. They were no longer alternating between light and darkness. Every now and again they would flare into increased brilliance, which did not diminish.

"Realizing that laser was an encouragement rather than a deterrent," the commentator went on, "Captain Laverton decided to take evasive action and ordered the starting of the Mannschenn Drive units aboard his ship and *Rim Culverin*, reasoning that once the frigates were out of synchronization with normal space-time the hostile entities would be unable to press home their attack. At first it seemed that these tactics would be successful, but after a lapse of no more than fifteen seconds the things reappeared at even closer range

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than before, obviously matching temporal precession rates. Captain Laverton returned to normal space-time briefly—and in the few seconds before he restarted his Mannschenn Drive, just as the entities reappeared off *Rim Carronade's* quarter, launched a torpedo with a fission warhead fused for almost instant detonation. This defensive action was successful."

The screen displayed a fireball of incandescent plasma, expanding and thinning, the obvious aftermath of an atomic explosion in deep space. Through the cloud of glowing gases could be seen only a mere half dozen of the entities—earlier there had been at least fifty of the things.

"Returning to NST, Captain Laverton observed that the majority of the creatures had been destroyed and that the few survivors were sluggish and—he thought erroneously—badly injured. Two were dispatched by laser fire. The remaining four retreated rapidly, eluding the frigates.

"The first phase of Operation Rimhunt was over."

"The next spool, sir?" asked Miss Walton.

"Not just yet, if you don't mind," replied Haab. Then: "I beg your pardon, Commodore. But I'd like to talk about what we've just seen first."

"Talk away, Captain." Grimes refilled and lit his pipe. "Talk away."

"As you know, Commodore, I've seen the stills and read the reports that your navy passed on to the Federation Survey Service, that the Survey Service, in its turn, passed on to the Foundation. I was present at most of the conferences of the Foundation's boffins. I didn't understand all they were saying, but I caught the general drift. The energy eaters, as they dubbed them, are just that. Their peculiar Moebius Strip configuration ensures that their entire surface is exposed to any source of radiation. According to *our* mathematicians they must be susceptible to magnetic fields—so the cage that our people are designing should work. The creatures are also susceptible to beamed Carlotti transmissions, which could be used to prevent a caged entity from escaping by desynchronizing with normal space-time."

Grimes grunted affirmatively.

"And as we have just seen—they can be killed. Killed by kindness." Haab chuckled dryly. "Throw the energy of a nuclear blast on to their plates and they're like a compulsive eater digging his grave with a knife and fork."

"Mphm."

"But *I* don't want to kill them. I want to capture one, or more than one, to take back to Earth. I want to save a specimen of this unique life form, probably not a native of this galaxy, before the species is hunted to extinction."

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"Then you had better get cracking," Grimes told him without much sympathy. To him a menace to navigation was just that. "At last report there's probably only one of the things left."

"Moebius Dick," murmured Haab.

THEY watched the remainder of the films of Operation Rimhunt, which could as well have been called Operation Search and Destroy. The use of fission weapons, stumbled upon by Captain Laverton, remained effective, but it had to be improved upon. The energy eaters were intelligent—just how intelligent no one knew, probably no one ever would know. After the almost complete wiping out of that first cluster they tended to run from the Confederacy's warships. Magnetic fields, set up by two or more vessels, were an invisible net from which not all of the entities escaped—and those that did so made their getaway by desynchronization. Time-space twisting Carlotti beams were employed by the hunters and this technique seemed to inhibit temporal precession.

"Butchers," muttered Haab at last. "Butchers."

"Exterminators," corrected Grimes. "But both butchers and exterminators are essential to civilization. What about all the animals you have killed in your profession? Can you afford to talk?"

"I can, Commodore. In the first place, I've gone after living specimens far more than I have dead ones. In the second place, the odds have never been stacked against the quarry in my hunts—as they have been in this operation of yours."

Grimes grunted. "I'm not a hunter. If I really wanted a dinner of grilled trout I'd be quite capable of tossing a hand grenade into the stream. If I have an infestation of rats or mice I go out and buy the most effective poison on the market."

"I seem to recall," said Haab, "that you once used a fusion bomb to destroy a rat-infested ship."

"Yes. I did. It was necessary."

"Necessity," murmured Haab, "what sins are committed in thy name? But let's agree to shelve our differences. Do you think I could see the charts of sightings and—ah—victorious naval actions?"

"Let's have them, please, Miss Walton," said Grimes.

GRIMES later entertained Haab in his home. After the captain had returned to his ship Grimes' wife, Sonya, said "So that's the great hunter."

"I hope you were impressed," said Grimes.

"Impressed? Oh, I suppose I was in a way. But the man's a monomaniac. Hunting is his whole life."

"But you can say in his favor that he's more concerned with capturing than killing."

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"Is that so much better?" she demanded. "Have you ever seen the Hummel Foundation's zoo?"

Grimes had seen it many years ago when he had been a very junior officer in the Survey Service. He had thought at the time that those animals from Earth-type planets had been comparatively lucky, they had been allowed a limited freedom in the open air. The beings from worlds utterly unlike Earth had been confined in transparent domes, inside which the conditions of their natural habitats had been faithfully reproduced in all respects but one—room to run, fly or slither.

He said, "I think I know what you mean."

"I should hope you do," she replied. "I'd sooner be dead than in a cage."

"Haah's only doing his job."

"But he needn't enjoy it so much."

"Are we so much better?" he queried. "Here are these creatures, drifting in from the Odd Gods of the Galaxy know where. They may be intelligent—but have we tried to find out? Oh, no—not us. All we did find out is how to destroy them."

"Don't come over all virtuous, John. You were the first to start screaming about menaces to navigation on the Lorn-Llanith route. Now your precious lightjammers can come and go as they please. And that's what you wanted."

THE following morning he received a call from Admiral Kravitz. "I'm putting you back on the active list, Grimes."

"Again, sir? My paper work piled up when I made the voyage in *Pamir* and I'm still trying to shovel my way through the worst of the drifts."

"I want one of our people along in *New Bedford* as an observer. You are the obvious choice for the assignment."

"Why me?"

"Why not you? You were keen enough to make a voyage in *Pamir* when it suited you. Now you can make a voyage in Haab's ship when it suits me."

"Does Captain Haab know I'll be along?"

"He has been told that he will have to have a representative of our navy aboard when he lifts from Port Forlorn. He has only one spare cabin in his ship—a dogbox—so you'll not be able to have Sonya along. Still, it should be an interesting trip."

"I hope so," said Grimes.

"With you among those present, it will be." The admiral chuckled. "But I have to ring off. I'll leave you to fix everything up with Haab. Let me know later what's been arranged. Over and out."

Grimes rose from his desk. "Miss Walton," he said to his secretary, "I shall be aboard *New Bedford* if anybody wants me. Meanwhile, you can call Captain Macindoe at

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his home—he's due back from leave, as you know—and ask him to come in to see me after lunch. He'll be acting superintendent in my absence."

"Not B— Not Commander Williams again?" asked the girl disappointedly.

"No. Billy Williams, as you almost called him, is better at looking after his precious *Rim Malemute* than keeping my chair warm. What the pair of you were doing when I was away in *Pamir* and on Llanith I hate to think."

He grinned, then made his way out of the office.

He looked with fresh interest at *New Bedford* as he walked briskly across the apron. His earlier curiosity about her had been academic rather than otherwise, but now that he would be shipping out in her he was beginning to feel almost a proprietorial concern.

He stared up at the dully gleaming tower that was her hull, at the sponsons and turrets that housed her weaponry, at the antennae indicative of sophisticated electronic equipment of a nature usually found only in warships and survey ships. But she was both, of course. Her normal employment could be classed as warfare of a sort and as survey work—also of a sort.

Grimes marched up the ramp to the after airlock. His way into the compartment was barred by an officer who asked curtly, "Your business, sir?"

Grimes' prominent ears started to redden. Surely everybody in Port Forlorn knew who he was. But this ship, of course, was not a regular visitor and her personnel were not Rimworlders.

He said gruffly, "Commodore Grimes to see Captain Haab."

The young man went to a telephone. "Fourth mate here, Captain. A Commodore Grimes to see you. . . Yes, sir. Right away." Then to Grimes: "Follow me, sir."

The elevator carried them swiftly up the axial shaft. Haab's quarters were just below and abaft the control room. The master rose from his desk as Grimes was ushered into his day cabin. "Welcome aboard, Commodore. Thank you, Mr. Timon, you may carry on." When the officer had left Haab asked, "And what can I do for you, Commodore Grimes?"

"I believe, Captain, that you've already heard from our admiralty."

"Indeed I have. They're insisting that I carry some snot-nosed ensign or junior lieutenant with me as an observer—"

"Not an ensign or a lieutenant, Captain."

"Who, then?"

Grimes grinned. "Me."

Haab did not grin in return. "But you're not—"

"But I am. I'm a reserve officer back on the active list as and from this morning."

"Oh?" Haab managed a frosty smile. "I'm afraid I can't offer you

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much in the way of accommodation, Commodore. This is a working ship. There's a spare cabin the mate has been using as a storeroom—he's getting it cleaned out now."

"As long as there's a bunk—"

"There is—but not much else." Haab's grin was a little warmer. "But I am neglecting my duties as a host." He walked to the little bar that stood against the bulkhead under the mounted head of some horrendously horned and tusked beast Grimes could not identify. "Perhaps you will join me in a sip of *mayrenroth?*"

"It will be my pleasure." Haab filled small glasses with viscous, dark-brown fluid and Grimes accepted his, raised it. "Your very good health, sir."

"And yours, Commodore."

The drink was potent, although Grimes did not much care for its flavor. He said, "This is an unusual—ah—spirit."

"Yes. I laid in a supply when I was on Pinkenbah. The natives ferment it from the blood of the *mayren.* a big, carnivorous lizard."

"Fascinating," said Grimes, swallowing manfully. "I suppose your ship is well stocked with all manner of foods and drinks."

"She is," Haab told him.

III

NEW BEDFORD lifted from Port Forlorn on a cold, drizzly morning, driving into and through the gray overcast. Grimes was a guest in her control room and, he was made to feel, a very unwelcome guest. Haab was coldly courteous, but his officers managed to convey the impression that they resented the presence of the outsider and were demanding silently of each other. *What is this old bastard doing here?*

New Bedford went upstairs in a hurry. Word had come through to Port Forlorn that *Rim Arquebus* was not only tracking what was believed to be the last of the energy eaters but had already made two unsuccessful attempts to destroy the creature. Haab had protested and had been told this sector of space was under the jurisdiction of the Rim Worlds Confederacy and that he, his ship and his people were only there on sufferance. The attitude adopted by his government did not make things any more pleasant for Grimes.

Haab wasted little time setting trajectory once he was clear of Lorn's Van Allens. He lined his ship up on an invisible point in space some light-years in from the Llanith sun, then put his inertial drive on maximum acceleration, with his Mannschenn Drive developing a temporal precession rate that Grimes considered foolhardy. Foolhardy or not, the discomfort was extreme—the crusing weight of three gravities acceleration combined with the eerie

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sensation of always being almost at the point of living backward.

Apart from these discomforts she was not a happy ship. Her people, from the master down, were too dedicated. They lived hunting, talked hunting, thought hunting and, presumably, dreamed hunting. Grimes was allowed into a conversation only when it was assumed that he would make some contribution to the success of the expedition—and this was not often.

One night, at dinner, Haab did ask him for his views on the energy eaters.

"How intelligent do you think they are, Commodore?"

Grimes put down the fork with which he had been eating some vaguely fish-tasting mess, about which he had not dared to inquire. The implement clattered loudly on the surface of the plate—the high acceleration took some getting used to. He said, "You've seen all the reports, Captain Haab."

"Yes, Commodore Grimes. But you must have formed an opinion. After all, the energy eaters are in your back garden."

Grimes decided that he might as well talk as eat—he would not be missing much. "I don't suppose I need to tell you about the Terran shark, Captain. He has, however, been described as a mobile appetite. He just eats and eats without discrimination, often to his own undoing. He just hasn't the sense to consider the consequences. Right?"

Haab looked to Dr. Wayne, his biologist. Wayne grinned and said, "The Commodore hasn't put it in very scientific language, but he's not far off the beam."

"Then," Grimes went on, "we have human beings who are compulsive eaters. They often are far from being unintelligent—yet they cannot control themselves, even though they know that they are digging their graves with knives and forks. The energy eaters are more intelligent than sharks. They may be as intelligent as we are but we don't know. Intelligent or not, they are handicapped."

"Handicapped? Just how?" demanded Haab.

"Unlike human compulsive eaters they have no control over their intake. If there is raw energy around they absorb it, whether they want to or not. They know, I think, that the absorption of the energy generated by a nuclear explosion will be fatal—but if they are in the vicinity of such a blast they cannot help themselves. Sorry—they can help themselves, but only by exercizing their power of temporal precession. And by the time they found this out they were almost extinct."

"Then Moebius Dick will give us a good fight," commented the mate. "He has survived in spite of everything that the navy has thrown at him."

"The commodore isn't very interested in fighting fish," said

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Haab. "He told me that he fishes for trout with hand grenades."

"I believe in getting results," said Grimes, conscious that the officers and specialists around the table were looking at him coldly.

NEW BEDFORD sped through the warped continuum, homing on the continuous Carlotti signal that Grimes had persuaded the captain of *Rim Arquebus* to transmit. The warship was remaining in the vicinity of the last sighting of Moebius Dick and had received orders from the admiralty to cooperate with Haab. Coded signals had been made to Grimes and, reading them, he had gained the impression that Captain Welldean of the *Arquebus* was far from happy. But Grimes' heart did not bleed for Welldean. Welldean was in his own ship with his own people as shipmates and his own cook turning out meals to his own taste. No doubt his feelings had been hurt when he had been ordered to abandon his own hunt and to put himself under the command of a reserve officer. But he was not an unwelcome guest aboard somebody else's vessel.

At last the tiny spark that was *Rim Arquebus* showed up just inside the screen of the mass proximity indicator. Speed was reduced and eventually both drive units were shut down. *Rim Arquebus* hung there, five kilometers from *New Bedford*, a minor but bright constellation in the blackness.

Welldean's fat, surly face looked out from the screen of the NST transceiver at Grimes and the others in *New Bedford's* control room.

Have you any further information, Captain?" asked Haab.

Welldean replied in a flat voice, "The EE emerges into NST at regular half hourly intervals, remaining for ten minutes each time, presumably to feed on the radiation emitted by my ship. Pursuant to instructions—" he seemed to be glaring directly at Grimes—"I have made no hostile moves. Would the Commodore have any further orders for me?"

"None at the moment, Captain," Grimes told him. "Just stand by."

"*Rim Arquebus* standing by," acknowledged Welldean sulkily.

"When will Moebius Dick—" Haab was interrupted by a shout from his mate.

"There she blows!"

The energy eater had appeared midway between the two ships. It was huge, brilliantly luminous, lazily rotating. Grimes paraphrased wryly, *He who eats and runs away will live to eat some other day . . .* This thing had eaten and run away, eaten and run away and it had grown, was a vortex of forces all of a kilometer across. It would never fit into *New Bedford's* capacious hold, a compartment designed for

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the carriage of alien life forms, some of them gigantic. But this did not matter. The cage of beams and fields would be set up outside the ship, but still within the temporal precession field of the Mannschenn Drive.

Grimes, a mere observer aboard a vessel that was not his own, felt superfluous, useless, as Haab and his officers went into the drill that had been worked out to the last detail. The mate, Murgatroyd, would remain on board in charge of the ship—and Haab, with the second, third and fourth mates, would go out in the one-man chasers. Haab was already in his spacesuit—the small craft were no more than flying framework, unpressurized—and his prosthetic leg, through some freak of sound conductivity, clicked loudly as he moved. In his armor, with that mechanical noise accompanying every motion of his legs, he was more like a robot than a man, even though his chin beard was jutting through the open faceplate of his helmet.

"Good hunting, Captain," said Grimes.

"Thank you, Commodore." Haab turned to his mate. "You're in charge of the ship, Mr. Murgatroyd. Don't interfere with the hunt." Then, to Grimes; "Will you tell Captain Welldean to keep his guns and torpedoes to himself?" Welldean's heavy face scowled at them from the screen of the NST transceiver.

"Moebius Dick has gone," announced Murgatroyd.

"When he surfaces again, we shall be in position," Haab told him as he left the control room.

Murgatroyd looked at Grimes. *There's nobody else to talk to,* he seemed to be thinking, *so I may as well pass the time of day with you.* He said, "The Old Man always brings 'em back."

"Alive?" queried Grimes.

"When he wants to," replied the mate.

Then he laughed. "He hasn't much choice as far as that thing's concerned. If it's dead it's—nothing." Even in free fall he contrived to give the impression of being slumped in his seat. An incongruous wistfulness softened the rough, scarred, big-featured face under the coarse, yellow hair.

"You wish you were out in one of the chasers," Grimes stated rather than asked.

"I do. But somebody has to mind the shop—and it always seems to be me. There they go, Commodore."

Four bright sparks darted into the emptiness between *New Bedford* and *Rim Arquebus*. As they reached a predetermined position they slowed, stopped, then slid into a square formation. Moebius Dick should reappear at the center of the quadrangle and then, at Haab's signal, each of the little crafts would become a fantastically powerful electromagnet and each would emit the beamed Carlotti

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transmissions, effectively netting the energy eater in time and space.

Murgatroyd and Grimes stared into the screen of the mass proximity indicator. Four little points of light marked the positions of the chasers, a much fainter one denoting the presence of the energy eater.

"Master to *New Bedford,*" crackled from the speaker. "Check position, please."

"*New Bedford* to master," replied Murgatroyd. "You are exactly in position. Over."

"*Rim Arquebus* to Commodore Grimes," put in Welldean. "Do you wish me to take any action when the EE surfaces?"

"Haab to Grimes. You are only an observer. And that goes for your navy, too. Over."

"The old man gets tensed up," remarked Murgatroyd, with the faintest hint of apology in his voice."

"*Rim Arquebus* to Commodore Grimes. My weaponry is manned and ready," persisted Welldean.

"So is mine." Murgatroyd chuckled, waving a big hand over his fire-control console.

The minutes, the seconds, ticked by. Grimes watched the sweep second hand of the clock. He had noted the time of *Moebius Dick's* disappearance. The half-hour was almost up. When that red pointer came around to 37. . .

"Now!" yelled the Mate.

Moebius Dick was back. The enormous circle of gyrating luminescence had reappeared in the center of the square formed by the chasers. From the NST speaker came the low-pitched buzz and crackle of interference as the solenoids were energized. The energy eater hung there, quivering, seeming to shrink within itself. Then it moved, tilting like a precessing gyroscope.

Haab's voice could be heard giving orders: "Increase to six hundred thousand gausses. To six-fifty—seven hundred—".

From one of the chasers came a bright, brief flare and from the speaker a cry of alarm: "Captain, my coil has blown!"

"Master to second and fourth mates—triangular formation."

Moebius Dick was spinning about a diametric axis, no longer a circle of light but a hazy sphere of radiance. The energy eater was rolling through the emptiness, directly toward one of the three still-functioning chasers. The small craft turned to run. *Rim Arquebus* stabbed out with a barrage of laser beams. In *New Bedford's* control room Murgatroyd swore, added his fire to that from the frigate. It was ineffective—or highly effective in the wrong way. The monster glowed ever more brightly as it absorbed the energy directed at it, moved ever faster. The chaser turned and twisted desperately, hopelessly. The other chasers could not pursue for fear of running into

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the fire from the ships. There was nothing that they could have done, in any case.

"The old man's boat—" muttered Murgatroyd. "I guess it's the way he wanted to go—" His hand fell away from the firing stud. Moebius Dick was rolling over Haab's small and fragile craft.

Grimes, on the NST VHF, was ordering, "Hold your fire, *Rim Arquebus!* Hold your fire!"

Welldean's voice came back: "What the hell do you think I'm doing?" Adding, as a grudging afterthought: "Sir."

The lights of the chaser flared briefly through the luminous, swirling haze that enveloped them, flared and died. But something, somebody, broke through the living radiance. It was the spacesuited Haab, using his personal propulsion unit to drive him back to his ship.

He broke through and broke away and for a second or so it seemed that he would succeed. Then Moebius Dick was after him, overtaking him, enveloping him. From the NST speaker came a short, dreadful scream. The globe of flame that was the energy eater seemed to swell, was swelling, visibly and rapidly, assuming the appearance of a gigantic, spherical fire opal. The three surviving chasers retreated rapidly.

Dark streaks suddenly marred the iridescent beauty of the sphere, spread, rapidly covering the entire surface. Where Moebius Dick had been there was only nothingness.

No, not nothingness.

Floating in the darkness, illumined by the searchlights of the three small craft, was the lifeless, armored figure of Captain Haab.

"They'll bring him in," muttered Murgatroyd. "I'll take him back to Earth for burial. Those were his wishes."

"*Rim Arquebus* to *New Bedford,*" came Welldean's voice. "Do you require medical assistance? Shall I send a boat with my surgeon—"

"We've a quack of our own," snarled Murgatroyd, "and a good one. But even he won't be able to do anything. The old man is dead."

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"IT WAS his leg that saved him," said Grimes to Sonya when, back at Port Forlorn, he was telling her the story of the hunt.

"How do you make that out?"

"Well, perhaps it wasn't his leg, but all of us came to the conclusion that it was, as it were, the last straw that broke the camel's back."

"Make your mind up, John. I'd gotten used to the idea that Moebius Dick was a sort of latter-day white whale—and now you refer to him as a camel!"

"You know what I mean—I'm talking about the item that finally made him lose control. Moebius Dick had been feeding well over a period of quite some weeks. Every time *Rim Arquebus* heaved a torpedo at him he'd skim the cream off the fireball and then vanish, being too intelligent to overeat. But all life forms tend to act unintelligently when infuriated and he was no exception. When he broke out of Haab's electromagnetic net he was no more than a dangerous, vicious animal. He was being pumped full of photons by the concentrated laser fire from the two ships—and it meant as little to him as a stream of bullets means to a charging carnivore. He 'killed' Haab's chaser, gulping all the energy from its machinery. He would have killed Haab himself—Haab was in a state of complete paralysis when he was brought on board—if he hadn't started his meal on the Captain's leg.

"You know that the Tanganoran's are famous for their powered prosthetic limbs, don't you? Haab's right leg was a beautiful machine with its own, built-in power plant—cells with a working life of a least twenty standard years after installation, a slow, rigidly controlled fission process. Moebius Dick got that twenty years' worth of energy in one bite."

"Critical mass or critical charge—or whatever?" murmured Sonya. "But Haab's anagramatic namesake wasn't as lucky with *his* peg leg."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Or was he more than just a namesake?"

"I still don't get you."

"You must remember that talk we had with the Reverend Madam Swithin about reincarnation. How she told us that—according to the tenets of her Church—some souls have to wait around for centuries until the shuffling of chromosomes and genes produces just the right body, with just the right brain and psychological make-up, for their next embodiment. "It makes an odd sort of sense, doesn't it? Captain Ahab, the whaler—Captain Haab, the hunter—"

"But Ahab was only a fictional character!" Grimes, protested to his wife.

"Aren't we all finally?" she asked reasonably. "Those of us who deserve being made into legends?" ★

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GALAXY BOOKSHELF

Theodore Sturgeon

"WONDER of wonder of wonders," said the chairlady, after my speech at a Book Fair in Cape Cod a dozen or so years ago. "Here's an author who speaks for an hour about a new young writer, and never once mentions the title of his own new book!" She was describing my response to the first Brian Aldiss story that reached its fist up from the printed page to punch me in the mouth. Another recollection. At one of the earliest Milford Conferences, Damon Knight and Jim Blish came up with the interesting notion that a writer has a thing he says and he tends to say it over and over again—not by any means repetitiously, but thematically or in his selection of image and relevant metaphor. What Brian Aldiss says over and over is, "I am concerned about what's happening to us," and "what's happening" and "us" are projected in the widest and deepest possible ways. There are plenty of writers, especially in sf, who are aware and alert and who try their best to be relevant, but I know of no other, with the possible exception of Frank Herbert, who warns us so consistently that we are, as a species, horror-bound. He warns us because he loves us, really thinks we have something worth saving. This emerges from Brian's comedies (he can be very funny) and his tragedies and in his short tense suspense pieces. His new retrospective from DAW, *The Book of Brian Aldiss*, composed of stories which first appeared in British and U.S. magazines from 1957 until this year, bears out this notion, and the long-awaited paperback appearance of his novel *Barefoot in the Head* brings it to a high peak. *Barefoot* is truly an experience and, you must be warned, it isn't an easy one. He begins singing his melody

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in single notes and is soon singing harmony with himself, like Joni Mitchell recording a second voice track. At length he begins to play in chords, using a whole boxful of tricks and devices—puns, *double-entendres*, metaphors, neologisms. Ultimately he arrives at verse—because, one feels, he has used up everything else.

Barefoot in the Head therefore is without question, an assault, and it follows that comparison with James Joyce is inevitable (Joyce used to write on huge cardboard sheets with many colors of crayon, doing the same phrase in three or four or even five ways as a first draft, and then fusing them into the final one) and whether Aldiss has done less than Joyce—or something different from Joyce—is for the assessment of a far more profound Joycian than the undersigned. Do not take this book lightly—and do not forget it.

ANOTHER writer who is not to be taken lightly is Frank Herbert, whose *The God Makers* is quite another kind of experience. Herbert writes fables of a high order. By fables I mean narratives in which the basic statement—"moral", if you like—transcends the story line and is useful elsewhere. There is, I think, a rising tide of profound religious and philosophical thinking in the speculative field just now and in these complex and puzzling and immensely fruitful areas Frank Herbert seems quite at home. Long before *Dune* he had shown his ability to establish a scene—plant, culture, star-system, what-have-you—by a strict set of rules and adhere to it. And so he does in this new novel despite its meld of space and psi, of science and miracle. The story of Lewis Orne and his quest for the nature of godhood produces many a parallel, many an analogy, many a flash of recognition of things the reader knows, or almost knows, about the nature of his own devils and, possibly, his own powers. Unlike the Aldiss, this book can be read, if you like, purely for the excitement of its narrative line, the way an eight-year-old can read *Gulliver*. But if you want layers and levels this is one of those books that will give you back whatever you're capable of carrying to it.

SOME sf addicts profess, in fury or disgust or even in terror, that the beloved field is being diluted by the mainstream, and that gone forever are the days of hard science and high adventure. Fear not. Not while Ben Bova is around and doing such things as his *As On a Darkling*

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Plain. Taking off from the reliable old idea of truly alien artifacts found on a body—in this case, Titan—Bova gives us a neatly interwoven tale of a man's obsessive battle to unearth their secrets and of the personal, physical—and particularly the bureaucratic obstacles in his way. From the "biological blizzard" which is Jupiter to the subsidiary adventures of the exploration missions and finally to the advanced hard science of the "machines on Titan" I liked it—I believed it.

ONE thing I like and believe only the hard way, uphill and very seldom, is sword-and-sorcery. Many a murrain has been called down upon me for this and I'm sorry, but I can't lie to you about it. What entranced me early about it was the magic of Arthur (Ourouboros) Eddison and C.L. Moore—to say nothing of my childhood infatuation with Burroughs' John Carter, and of course Tolkien. I find, however, that the vast bulk of s&s has the same defect, the same permanent prohibition from becoming great and lasting literature, that TV series have. The genre's very nature dictates that the sword-swinging protagonist must be the same person at the end of the story as he is at the beginning. No matter how well written or superbly cast, no matter how horrific the monsters and the hordes or how far-out the magic land, evanescence and triviality do prevail—and true suspense is impossible for me if the central character cannot develop, age, fail, die, or (as is too often the case) even learn. Some writers know how to avoid this—le Guin for one—and now and again there arrives a book so colorful, whose language is so cadenced and precise and whose characters (for all their basic changelessness) are so dimensional that you have to love them anyhow. Such a novel is Zelazny's *The Guns of Avalon*—mostly because such is Zelazny, whose very laundry lists, I swear, could be set to music like a lyric. *Avalon* is another in the series about the nine princes in Amber and will voyage you well.

EVER since, at the behest of the late great John Campbell, writers began wrestling with the logic of magic, the notion has affixed itself to sf as well as fantasy. Witchcraft has its own rigid and rigorous disciplines and time and again has been the storage warehouse for ideas, substances, chemicals and processes used ultimately by formal science. With the new and deeper preoccupation with "inner space" witchy ideas chime

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more and more harmoniously with "psi" concepts and present intriguing alternatives to established physical laws and principles. That's fair enough, too—the idea of close-up photographs of Mars would have been called witchcraft not long ago, so why not grab the other end of the broom and have witchcraft circumvent the light barrier? Gordon Dickson's *The Pritcher Mass* gives us a most intriguing witch and some interesting insights into the craft, embodied in a genuinely original tale of a psychic or paranormal "mass" in construction out beyond Pluto, which will be used to scan deep space for planets desperately needed by the sealed-in population of a poisoned Earth. Dickson, like Aldiss, exhibits a concern for the environment and sounds a grim warning; this time it's in the area of pollution-induced plant mutation, which has a frightening logic to it. A good book.

DAMON KNIGHT is two kinds of editor, both good. His "theme" anthologies are invariably well-conceived and well-balanced and his originals—the *Orbits*—remain one of the most potent proving grounds for new writers and for new concepts and approaches for established ones. *Perchance to Dream* is a good example of the first. The stories are about dreams and surely you'll have read some of them before. But—do you have a copy of Ambrose Bierce's *Incident at Owl Creek Bridge* around the house? Aiken's *Mr. Arcularis*? Here are dream stories by Maugham, Dostoevsky, Collier, Borges and others, treasures all. Funny dreams, frightening dreams, puzzling and thought-provoking and awesome dreams. Not a dud in the lot—a real jewelbox of a book.

Orbit 11 is up to Knight's high standards. Some very well practiced hands are here—Gene Wolfe, Fred Pohl, Edward Wellen, Charles Platt. Some new lights, already bright: Effinger, Thurston, Dozois. And some new discoveries. Knight is one editor who can surf on the "new wave" without losing sight of the beach.

ASIDE from Farmer's *Lord Tyger*, which is totally unique, the most unusual book of the year is Norman Spinrad's *The Iron Dream*. It was written in six weeks by a commercial pulp writer. It is basically a hack sword-and-sorcery job, whose occasional passages of raw power are probably due more to the author's psychopathology than to consciously controlled literary craftsmanship. So, at least, claims the critic Homer Whipple in

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a penetrating criticism appended to the book. The novel was written by one Adolf Hitler. A short biography precedes the original title page, which is not *The Iron Dream* at all, but *Lord of the Swastika*. It is absolutely apalling. It contains enough gore to close every blood-bank in the country for a year. It's a terrible book. And brilliant, a Class Plus A-One tour de force by Norman Spinrad. A high-priority must.

●

Available in paperback, and recommended: *Eight Strange Tales*, ed. Vic Ghidalia. (Fawcett, 75¢). Literate weirdies, Blackwood to Bradbury. *Strange Tomorrows*, ed. Robert Hoskins (Laucer, $1.25). Five good long ones, over 100,000 words. *This Side of Infinity* (Ace, 75¢), eight personal choices of Terry Carr, who knows how to choose 'em *your* way. *Best SF Stories from New Worlds 5.* (Berkley, 75¢) Michael Moorcock, who makes waves, gives us eleven yarns which, together, give very much of the flavor of that highly effective British magazine. *Great Short Novels of Adult Fantasy* (Ballantine, $1.25), edited by Lin Carter, has a fine diversity and spread: Pratt/deCamp; Anatole France, Robert W. Chambers and my beloved William Morris (he of the Pre-Raphaelites). I like the stories better than editor Lin Carter fore- and afterwords and rubrics, which strike me as intrusive and self-advertising. *A Separate Reality: Further Conversations with Don Juan*, by Carlos Castenada (Pocket Books; $1.25). You are not permitted not to have this book! Don Juan, a Yaqui Indian, as reported with searching honesty by Casteneda, has hold of some truths that cannot fail to stabilize and benefit any reader who is willing to pay attention. Two fine novels by Mack Reynolds in an Ace Double: *Blackman's Burden* and *Border, Breed nor Birth* (95¢). More than your money's worth. Hal Clement's *Needle* (Lancer, 95¢) is back again—fascinating. Likewise *Armageddon 2419* (Ace, 75¢), the original Philip Francis Nowlan novel that began the Buck Rogers story, quaint but interesting, and John Campbell's *The Black Star Passes* (Ace, 75¢). There's a mother-lode of Asimov's F&SF articles: *The Stars in Their Courses* (Ace, $1.25), *Of Time and Space and Other Things* (Lancer, $1.25) and his long out-of-print *Building Blocks of the Universe* (Lancer, $1.25). And finally, Burrough's two great underground (!) classics, *Pellucidar* and *At the Earth's Core* (Lancer, 75¢ each). ★

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Aliens on their home planet, they were doomed to conquer the Universe . . .

SIX MEN FROM ALPHA

J. B. Clarke

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I

THE three-year quarantine was practically over. His eager imagination conjuring blue skies, green fields, laughing children and the other ingredients of a life literally of another world, George Hender stood beside his bed in his quarters below the Luna crater Eratosthenes and began to pack his few personal belongings. Human-like he did not think of the ugliness of poverty and pollution, of the fact men still slew each other on that cloud-dappled planet high in the Luna sky.

He first packed all the vials containing the samples he had been allowed to retain for his own use. Three were carefully banded together—one vial containing the corpse of an insectlike creature with ten legs, the second a bright purple ball of fluff, the third a tiny plant with grayish leaves and a fleshy stalk. Not much to the uninformed eye perhaps, but Hender knew these were three stages in the development of the same life form. Next came the water sample he had collected in the mist below the Great Cliff. Again not much to look at. But it was a reminder of the glittering cascade that poured uninterrupted for three thousand meters down the side of that fantastic geological fault. Then there were microscope slides of various organisms—plant, animal and a few in between. A slender piece of vine with a tensile strength approaching that of steel. A chunk of wood that, when heated to one hundred and eighty degrees, could be molded like soft putty.

The samples were followed by his two miniature cameras. Spools of film totaling he did not know how many exposures. Not as extensive, of course, as the official records of the expedition. But a man needed to do work of his own on a mission of such long duration. Schekart, for instance, had taken to painting. And Hender had little doubt those gloomy landscapes would hang in many of Earth's major galleries.

His instrument and sample belt. He coiled it carefully despite the fact it was scarred and frayed as if it had been forcibly dragged through tightly wound barbed wire. That had happened when his lift-pack failed over one of the thorn forests—his body still bore the marks inflicted by those vicious six-inch barbs. But the belt had continued its usefulness on every field trip he made on Alpha Five, a proud record considering it had outlasted several sets of armorcloth coveralls.

Hender considered the belt carefully. Then he uncoiled it, held it upside down and shook it. Particles of dirt, some dust, and finally a few shreds of vegetable matter fell out. Nothing of interest, except. . .

HE PICKED up the brittle sliver of faded green and held

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it up to the light. It was just a blade of grass. But it was a blade of grass from a lawn most of the expedition members had said could not be grown. Young Brian McEvoy, however, was merely an electronics specialist. He knew nothing about botany, ecology, or indeed any of the life sciences. He only knew he had not brought five pounds of grass seed all the way from Earth for nothing. So he had consulted the ship's library, prepared the proper chemical nutrients, even improvised a sprinkler and pump to water his few square meters from a nearby stream. He had fussed, worried, made a thorough fool of himself—and after a few months created the lushest lawn on the planet. Actually the only lawn, Hender thought with a reminiscent smile. But it was fortunate its survival had depended upon such loving care. Otherwise the next expedition to Alpha Five would find its ecology drowned under an ocean of waving green.

More oddments went into the bag. A few items of clothing, a small abstract carved by John Ling just before the geologist lost the use of his right arm in a rock fall. And finally the few letters Hender had received only hours before *Golden Hind* moved out of Earth orbit and began its voyage to the Centauri system. He looked them over one by one. A polite farewell from Ronald, typed on office stationery. They had not seen each other for years anyway, so Ron could hardly be expected to gush over a brother he hardly knew. A couple from friends in the Astronaut Corps. He had largely lost contact with them, too, especially after he transferred to the Interstellar Project. And here was Anne's last letter. More personal of course, expressing sentiments deep and genuine. Would he have married her if he had not been on the Project? Probably. She had been a wonderful girl—he would have been a fool not to. But then again he had only met her because she happened to be one of the Project's technicians, so the question was hypothetical in any case. One of life's little ironies, he supposed.

The last letter was on cheap notepaper, so he handled it very carefully. But the dearly loved childish scrawl was still legible and he read it again, his memories of her little face as clear as they had been—how many hundred readings ago?

Darling daddy, she had written. *Please do not go away too long. Auntie Sue has told me you are going to a star, not like mommy but in a spaceship. She also said we cannot see the star from America, so I hope she and Uncle Jack will take me where I can see it some time. Come back soon and please bring me a star teddy. Love Wendy.*

Hender wished he knew what a star teddy was, but it had been too late to find out. Instead he hoped the painstaking model he had

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created from local materials and imagination would be an acceptable substitute. She was older now, but surely she would remember and understand.

Damn the blasted quarantine!

It was not so much the three years' confinement in this secret base that bothered him—at least not as much as the fact no outside contact had been permitted either way. People on Earth had not even been told *Golden Hind* was back—indeed, most of them thought the expedition had perished long ago on the fifth planet of Alpha Centauri!

Of course the reasons for the secrecy were logical enough. Doctor Fielden had expressed them very clearly just after the six returnees arrived in Eratosthenes.

"Medical science has advanced a great deal in the last few years," he told them. "To the extent, in fact, that no known disease is now beyond cure. Unfortunately popular opinion has misinterpreted this into the dangerous notion that no disease is beyond cure."

He had smiled wearily.

"Gentlemen, you know we risk the future of four billion human beings if we let you return home before we are sure you carry no infection of an alien nature. Some of my colleagues are so concerned with this problem that they have attempted—unsuccessfully I might add—to have the quarantine extended to five years. And you know what that might do to *your* health! Suffice to say it was eventually decided to keep your return secret until the previously agreed upon three years are over. That way there can be no pressure to force us to reduce this already minimum margin of safety.

"It was also agreed that during your stay here in Eratosthenes you will receive no news of a personal nature. Your quarantine will be difficult enough without your being faced with problems about which you can do nothing without breaking security."

The news had been unpleasant to say the least and the starmen had wasted no time voicing their objections. They were listened to, of course. Even the sophisticated specialists who shared their exile looked on the men who had been to Alpha Five with definite respect if not outright awe. But these decisions had been made long before the starship arrived off Titan Station—and were irrevocable. The six astronauts had had to be content with the luxuries provided for them, with the censored telecasts beamed directly from Earth and with the companionship of their fellow exiles. It was, incidentally, no accident that nineteen of the thirty-eight people who lived at the base were women. Eight couples were already married when the thirty-two specialists came to Eratosthenes and by the end of the first year four more couples signed contracts. The astronauts, however, had kept their

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single status, though only one—the monkish Howard Schekart—chose not to form an "attachment."

HENDER closed the bag carefully and pressed one of his identification labels to its side. He wondered if he would see much of Marguerite after they landed on Earth—if he had made a mistake when he told her he would enter no permanent union until he became fully adjusted to the new life. He was certain her feelings toward him were far stronger than she had admitted, but he also knew her pride would never let her accept the implication: *You'll do if no one else turns up . . .*

The P. A. cleared its throat and announced: "The final briefing will be held in the Common Room in fifteen minutes. Unless you are on essential duty, please attend."

"Oh?" Hender asked the air. He put the bag on the floor beside his bed, then went into the corridor and tapped on the door across from his.

"George," he said. "Can I come in?"

"It's open," she called.

He went in. She also was packing, but she looked up with an immediate smile.

"One to go," she said, referring to their own private countdown. "Nervous?"

He grimaced. "Frankly, I'm scared to death." He went over and kissed the nape of her neck. "You'll keep holding my hand, I hope?"

His voice was jocular, but Marguerite's discerning ear sensed it was only a veneer. *He's uptight,* she thought. *Terribly so.* And then, rationalizing: *But so are we all.*

For the thousandth time she wished she were not so emotionally involved with this man and again firmed her resolve to leave him as soon as the worst was over. But Marguerite Walsh was too good a psychologist to upset the delicate edge he was treading and too good a woman to want to.

So she smiled again, touched his face and said gently, "I'll be with you every step, dear."

She put a filmy thing into the case and snapped it shut. *Guess I won't see that again,* Hender thought wistfully, but immediately submerged the unbidden eroticism by asking, "What do you think Fielden is up to? I understood no more briefings would be necessary."

"So did I." She frowned. "Of course, he could have been hooked by our father image of him."

"I beg your pardon?"

"If you were the head of a large family that was about to split up, wouldn't you at least want to wish them well?"

He looked slightly startled. "Well, put that way—" Abruptly Hender's rather homely features creased into a broad grin. "So you figure we're in for a little paternal advice, huh?"

"That's my guess. We have all

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been away from home a long time, so it could be he wants to make sure he's not about to unload a bunch of anachronistic misfits. Anyway, let's go see, shall we?"

II

THE Eratosthenes base was a sprawling complex of chambers originally constructed to house the deep-space research unit of the International Science Academy. Economics had subsequently dictated its passing to the control of the Space Agency and minimal maintenance during long periods of idleness. When the first signals were detected from the returning starship, it was only necessary to make minor adjustments within its regular budget for the Agency to ready the base for immediate habitation. And then economies were continued. Maintainance of the base and its life-support systems became the responsibility of everyone—including crews under quarantine—especially the hydroponic gardens from which came the dual necessities of food and oxygen. The base was hardly the most desirable substitute for home for Earth-starved astronauts.

But all of this was behind them now—or nearly so—and as Hender and the brunette psychologist joined the others in the Common Room they found a puzzled air of expectancy, which more or less matched their own.

Marguerite clutched Hender's arm. "Isn't it strange?" she whispered. "Suddenly I don't feel like a person about to go home. More like someone about to leave it."

He looked down at her, his face intent. "Yes," he said. And meant it.

They sat together on a couch at the back of the room as a small man with lined features and unruly white hair faced the crowd and muttered a quick count of those present. Finally he nodded and waved for silence.

"With the exception of Mort and Peter who are on duty in Control," Dr. Marcus Fieldon announced, "I think we are all here."

"But not for long," retorted a voice from the audience.

The white head nodded. "No, Weldon, not for long. Which is one of the reasons for this final gathering. I must be sure we are all ready for our—ah—rebirth into the complexities of human society."

"Oh, come off it, Marcus." Weldon Gill, the commander of the Alpha Five expedition, squinted at the scientist from eyes injured when a lovely blue-gold flower had replied to his charmed curiosity with a squirt of acid. Though not completely blind—he had, for instance, functioned reasonably well during the remaining six weeks on the planet—Gill nevertheless chafed under his affliction with an almost bursting impatience. And because he knew a complete cure was

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available in any one of Earth's better hospitals his belligerence was understandable when he demanded, "You're not thinking of delaying our return, are you?" He glared pugnaciously. "Because if you are, forget it!"

"Actually I am considering no such thing," Fielden said mildly. "I am merely wondering whether or not we should continue the indoctrination sessions after we return home. Now will you please permit me to continue?"

The scientist looked around at his audience. They appeared a normal collection of people, male and female, young and middle-aged. They were also a highly intelligent group, which in a sense was his main problem. Intelligence went with sensitivity and because of that he knew many adjustments would be difficult. So he chose his words with care.

"I need hardly remind you that human beings suffer psychological deterioration if they remain away from their home planet for any period longer than three years. Though the reasons for this are not yet entirely clear, it is thought some kind of subtle relationship exists between man's physical environment and his mind—a link, if you will, which permits normal thought processes only when his senses indicate that gravity, air, light, etcetera are all Earth normal. We are fortunate, of course—those first three years can be tolerated with no noticeable ill effect. But after that the symptoms appear quite rapidly. Irritability, tiredness, inability to concentrate and so on—you know what they are.

"Questions. How long can a person remain away from Earth without suffering a complete breakdown? Does the deterioration process continue to an inevitable end or does it stop after a time, leaving the individual psychologically depleted but still functional? Or is there a reversal, an eventual return to normalcy? I am sure you understand the importance of these—especially with respect to future interstellar colonization."

Well here we are, Hender thought. *Gill, Ling, McEvoy, Roberts, Schekart and Hender. Six answers giving you the stars on a plate. And you have known it for three years, so why bring it up now?* He listened with increasing irritation as Fielden continued.

"Three other expeditions have since been sent to other star systems. *Enterprise* to Barnard's Star, *Columbus* to Lalande 21185 and *Deep Traveler* farthest of all—to Epsilon Eridani. We do not know what their crews may or may not find—or even that they will ever return. But the success of *Golden Hind* does at least hold out a slight hope that man has a future among the stars."

"Only a slight hope?" queried someone. "Why the doubts, Doctor?"

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Fielden peered toward the questioner and recognized Len Roberts, Alpha Five's geographer. "Why? Well let me ask *you* a question, Mr. Roberts. Why haven't you and your five colleagues suffered the same deterioration I was discussing a few moments ago? After all, you have been away from Earth for considerably more than your allotted three years."

Roberts, a large man with a luxurious black beard, stared back incredulously. "Are you pulling my leg? You know better than any of us—the time in hypothermia doesn't count. And neither do the two years we spent on Alpha Five. Our longest period of activity has been this last three years in Eratosthenes. So unless everything I have been told is crazy, that puts the six of us in exactly the same boat as the rest of you."

"Based on the assumption that hypothermia somehow restores the psychological balance? That those periods of activity between periods in hypothermia are not cumulative? Is that the basis of your reasoning, Mr. Roberts?"

"Not my reasoning damn it." the geographer shot back testily. "It was the reasoning of the people who organized our expedition—and you know that, too. They would hardly have sent us to the Centauri system if there was a chance we would wind up as raving lunatics."

"Of course not." Fielden paused a moment, then went on quietly: "Unfortunately, we now know their reasoning was in error."

HENDER jerked upright in his seat. *What in blazes is he talking about?* He looked at the girl at his side and saw that she was equally surprised. And so, apparantly, was everyone else in the room. Or so it seemed from the barrage of excited questions coming from all sides.

Marcus Fielden waved his hands for silence.

"I am going to show you the results of an experiment actually concluded some years ago. However, it was done in such secrecy that even I and my colleagues were not told of it—you will understand why when you see this tape. Anyway, it seems someone in the Agency's bureaucracy finally had the good sense to realize that we in Eratosthenes should have this knowledge. In his enlightenment he had it transmitted here" Fielden smiled sadly—"yesterday."

The obvious sarcasm was greeted with nervous laughter which reflected his audience's confusion and puzzled curiosity.

Hender knew he echoed everyone's feelings as he muttered, "I wish he'd shut up and get on with it."

Marguerite laid a hand on his arm. "Hush."

The lights dimmed and the Common Room's screen illuminated to show a large spacecraft settling

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down toward the surface of the moon. As dust flared out beneath the ship's braking jets, a service crawler trundled into view, its boarding tube already extended. Two space-suited figures rode in the tube's open end, a dangerous procedure that clearly indicated someone's urgency to get on board.

As his audience watched the ungainly surface vehicle approach its target Fielden said, "A commentary comes with this tape, but to save time I will give an abbreviated version. First let me remind you that the so-called 'remission' aspect of hypothermia was assumed on the basis of the work of several research people who independently corroborated each other's findings. Hypothermia, of course, had already made it possible for man to survive an interstellar journey, though there was little point to such an endeavor as long as the subsequent three-year quarantine left little or no time for planetary exploration. But now we knew—or thought we knew—that periods of activity between periods in hypothermia were not cumulative and it seemed we could dust off our interstellar plans and go ahead with the first flight. And so the Alpha Centauri mission was conceived and launched. And later, at regular intervals, we launched three other flights to more distant star systems.

"But after *Deep Traveler* had departed for Epsilon Eridani someone came to the belated realization that the remission aspect of hypothermia had never been proven by actual test. So plans for further missions were immediately canceled pending production of such proof. Which, ladies and gentlemen, is what this tape is all about."

The scene on the screen cut to within the crawler's boarding tube. The tube had been mated to the collar around the ship's airlock and the two men in space suits were opening the lock preparatory to entering the ship.

As the camera followed their activities, Dr. Fielden continued: "After working a standard three-year tour here on the moon four volunteers were placed in hypothermia aboard this ship—appropriately named *The Four Companions*—which under computer control was sent out to an orbit beyond Pluto. One year later the present automatics roused the men for what was to be their second consecutive tour away from Earth. They were isolated, of course, as few human beings had been before. But they had ample supplies, facilities for recreation and enough research work to keep them occupied all the time. In theory they would end the experiment in no worse shape than they had been at the end of their Luna tour. In practice, however—"

The dim figure beside the screen shrugged. "I supposed it was fortunate the vital control and life-sup-

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port systems of *The Four Companions* were safe behind armored bulkheads."

THE reasons for the doctor's last remark were immediately apparent in the next scene. A shocked indrawing of breath became audible as the lens of the camera peered at the unbelievable shambles within the spaceship. Furnishings were smashed to kindling—experimental apparatus was wrecked beyond recognition—the walls had been battered as if hit blindly and repeatedly by a madman with a club. Worst of all was a partly decayed corpse sprawled in the foreground, its broken skull centered on a huge stain which was obviously long dried.

"He was not the only one." Fielden's voice was dry and carefully devoid of emotion. "Another was found in the storage deck with a knife in his back, a third in the emergency airlock. That one apparantly died when he opened the outer door without the protection of a suit—in fact, as naked as the day he was born."

There was movement on the screen and the two men from the crawler reappeared supporting between them a shambling thing which at first seemed only partly human. But beneath the dirt and hair was the sick, blank-eyed face of what had once been a man.

Doctor Fielden touched a control and the screen blanked. As the lights flared high, he looked at his stunned audience and said quietly, "That man has since been cured, though I understand he has never made a full comeback. Small recompense I think, for the fact he and his friends broke completely under conditions we had assumed were perfectly safe."

Hender had had enough. As a catharsis for his anger he abruptly rose to his feet and snapped, "I don't know what all this is leading to, but it's pretty damn obvious the six of us here have contradicted the results of that so-called experiment." He took a deep breath. "How do you explain that?"

Hender sat down amid several shouts of approval. He looked at Marguerite and felt comforted by her reassuring gaze.

Fielden rubbed a hand over his eyes. He was tired and looked it. "Well, Mr. Hender, let me put it this way. We gambled when we sent you to Alpha Centauri. Though we knew the star had planets, there was no way of telling if any of the planets were habitable by man. In fact, we would have considered ourselves lucky if you had found even a world where you could live after a fashion under a pressure dome. What did happen, of course, was the last thing anyone expected—Alpha Five. With a breathable atmosphere, tolerable gravity, food sources compatible with human needs—the planet was

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so Earthlike, your physiological systems were fooled into believing it was Earth. Hence your continuing rationality even after three more years here in Erathosthenes."

In a stage whisper everyone could plainly hear, the irrepressible Brian McEvoy commented, "Now ain't that nice. We got no hangups!"

Marcus Fielden smilingly shook his head. "Not necessarily. Please don't forget you must still face reintroduction into Earth society—a process you may find more than a little difficult. But I believe we have prepared you well enough for that particular adjustment. And you will always be able to remind yourself that if it were not for Alpha Five—"

Sidetracked by an obviously unpleasant train of thought, the scientist's face darkened. After a moment he continued: "On the basis of what common sense tells me is the extreme scarcity of Earthlike worlds in the galaxy, plus the results of what Mr. Hender named 'that so-called experiment,' I rather hope I will not be around when *Enterprise* returns from Barnard's Star."

> *Extract from report by Marcus R. Fielden to the Executive Council of the World Space Agency:* Though the results of the *Four Companions* experiment proved the fallacy of our previous conclusions about hypothermia, the success is nevertheless heartening. Of course this unexpected bonus only partially offsets the unpleasant fact that landings on non-Earth type planets must henceforth be limited to quick 'look-ins' if we are to avoid the unpleasant consequences demonstrated by the experiment. I suppose the necessity for quarantine could be avoided if we restricted future crews to close-orbit research, though such limited missions would hardly justify their enormous expense.
>
> Regarding the other three missions, I must remind you of the astronomical odds against their finding another Alpha Five. So, to avoid repeats of the *Four Companions* tragedy, I suggest the members of each crew be again placed under hypothermia as soon as they return and kept on ice until an answer is found. Some future generation will then have to act according to its own ethics, though God knows I do not envy them such a decision if no answer is possible.
>
> One final point. As you know, I was concerned about how the *Golden Hind* crew would adjust to human society after an absence of half a century. After all, much has changed during that time. Especially delicate was the problem of immediate rela-

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tives, and George Hender's is a classic case. When I had his daughter notified of his impending arrival . . .

THE shuttles were larger and more luxurious than the more primitive models he remembered and, because of powered reentry, subjected their passengers to a much gentler ride. But as Hender rode down from orbit he paid little attention to these refinements. Instead he spent almost the whole trip staring with agonized intensity at the entertainment screen. Marguerite Walsh knew this was one battle he would have to fight alone, so she sensibly kept quiet and watched him. She had seen the picture of his daughter as he once had known her and she understood the terrible sense of loss he must have felt when viewphone contact had been made from Orbital Station Eight.

Wendoline Reed (nee Hender) was now a middle-aged widow with four grandchildren. She had lived most of her life while her father spent forty-four of the past forty-nine years in frozen suspension between the stars. Hender had always known, of course, the change that must occur in his daughter over those years. But that had been a conscious awareness, based on his knowledge that the calendars of Earth had still turned as the crew of *Golden Hind* remained in their hypothermia vaults. But his body, his glands, his instincts were only five years older—*they* knew the child of his flesh must only be thirteen; a gawky, preadolescent version of the merry eight-year-old who asked for a star teddy. Hender's conflict with himself was serious, and Marguerite had seen his shock when the graying lady with the maternal figure and the kind smile had appeared on the screen.

"My God," he had whispered. "She looks like my mother!"

But despite her own undoubted conflict, Mrs. Reed had acquitted herself nobly, welcoming her father with the gay and surprised chatter of someone meeting an old friend. Hender on the other hand had said very little, and as the shuttle knifed down through the stratosphere toward touchdown, Marguerite wondered if the trauma of society reentry would be merely temporary. Hender might very well need her professional—and womanly—services longer than either had supposed. And it was with only a slight twinge of guilt that she realized she did not mind at all.

The welcoming ceremonies were fortunately brief—the Agency had planned them so under advisement from Marcus Fielden. But the overwhelming presence of tens of thousands of people behind the security barriers had a noticeably disconcerting effect upon the six astronauts. They lined up nervously as the president of the World Union

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shook their hands and presented each with the W. U. award for meritorious service. And the thunderous roar of approval as they entered the presidential plane caused them to scramble up the ramp like shy animals heading for cover.

Marguerite accompanied Hender to a cabin at the rear of the aircraft where Mrs. Reed was waiting to greet her father in person. The younger woman watched a little uncomfortably as two strangers, connected by the closest ties of blood yet separated by nearly half a century, tried toact toward each other as society would expect.

After a quick embrace Hender presented his painstaking version of a star teddy. It was gray and blue and fluffy and had a sharp little snout, above which was a single multi-faceted eye. Though a creation out of his imagination, it had charming plausibility.

"Do you remember you asked for this?" Hender asked awkwardly. "Well, here's your star teddy."

To Marguerite's astonishment, Mrs. Reed was delighted. She held up the doll by its forelimbs and exclaimed happily, "Of course I remember! I even remember no one could convince me you weren't going to bring it to me before that Christmas. Wait till I tell my grandchildren about this!"

The muscles in Hender's face tightened convulsively. "So I'm a great-grandfather."

Mrs. Reed look at him with surprise. "Didn't they tell you?"

"Oh, yes. It's just that it's all so—" Hender floundered helplessly— "difficult."

Marguerite's heart ached. *He is so alone. I wonder if he will ever be able to look that dear lady in the face and call her Wendy? Or 'daughter?' Their relationship seems ludicrous and I suppose they both know it. And it is her problem, too. How can she possibly think of that young man as her father?*

But the problem did not arise. As if by unspoken agreement Hender and Mrs. Reed adopted the simple expedient of talking to each other without the use of either name or title, though to third parties they seemed willing to refer to "my father" or "my daughter." Otherwise the unaccustomed pressures upon all the astronauts remained—within hours after the plane delivered the president and his guests to the World Union complex in Geneva, they were obliged to attend a banquet given by the House of Assembly.

IT WAS a strained and rather strange affair, during which the guests of honor merely toyed with their food and—as the proceedings dragged on—began to display various signs of irritability. Though seated between Marguerite and Mrs. Reed, Hender seemed disinclined to talk to either and spent most of the time drawing nervous

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circles on the tablecloth with edge of a fork. He smiled sardonically when Weldon Gill was persuaded to say a few terse words, but lost interest again when Marcus Fielden began the main address on behalf of the six men from Alpha Five.

As Fielden spoke no one paid much attention to the marine who cat-footed behind the head table and whispered into the ear of Senator Wu Pao Wong, the distinguished Chinese seated on Brian McEvoy's left. It concerned, as it turned out later, a matter whose importance had been inflated by an overly zealous aide. But the marine had his instructions and, as he obeyed them, he leaned between the Senator and the astronaut to deliver his top-secret message. Inadvertently he knocked over a carafe of water which spilled its contents into McEvoy's lap. Before the embarrassed marine had a chance to apologize McEvoy jabbed his elbow into the leaning man's midriff and shouted, "You clumsy bastard!" Then he leaped out of his seat and flung himself on the gasping marine with maniacal rage.

Shocked out of his moody introspection by the sudden fracas, Hender stared astonished as someone yelled, "Grab him!" Two burly guards sprinted from their stations at the back of the hall, hauled the yelling astronaut off his victim and hustled him through a side door.

Got to help him. Hender thought automatically, hardly aware he had already pushed back his chair and risen to his feet. Marguerite called something to him, but he did not hear her in the mounting confusion as he joined Fielden and Gill and the others and hurried after the guards.

A fast moving medic had already gotten to McEvoy by the time they caught up with him in the adjoining lobby. Reacting to the drug the medic had just pumped into his system, the youngest of the astronauts barely had enough strength to lift his head and mumble, "Sorry—" before he sagged limply in the arms of his expressionless captors.

Fieldon pointed. "Put him on that couch, please." To the medic. "What did you give him?"

"Kirol B." The medic snapped his case shut, looked up and added reassuringly. "It's harmless. He'll be out of it in about four hours."

"He had better be," Fielden said. He briefly examined the unconscious man, stood errect and asked, "How is the fellow he attacked?"

"I'm all right sir," called a slightly hoarse voice. The marine pushed his way to the front of the gathering crowd, his face anxious. "But how is Mr. McEvoy?"

Fielden patted the man's uniformed arm. "Considering what he almost did to you, young man, I appreciate your concern. Anyway we'll let you know."

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The scientist turned back to the medic. "Have McEvoy taken up to my suite please. I'll be up directly."

"Yes, sir."

As the medic led the two guards and their unconscious burden towards the elevators, Gill asked, "What about the rest of us, Marcus? Something tells me we need a conference."

"Agreed." Fielden's grim gaze picked out the remaining five astronauts from the several dozen people who had crowded out of the banquet hall. "Gentlemen, I want to see you upstairs in half an hour. Subject for discussion—" he scowled angrily—"your future!"

Hender watched the little scientist hurry away. Then a warm presence pressed close to him and a familiar voice said, "Honey, you don't look well."

"My head aches."

"Otherwise?"

He looked away. "Otherwise I feel lousy."

She frowned worriedly. "That's what I thought. George, you're all suffering from—something."

Something? Well, that was one way of putting it, he supposed bitterly. Someone began to laugh—the sound was harsh and without humor. But it was only when Marguerite looked at him with pained surprise, he realized the laugh was his own.

A LITTLE less than two months after the incident at the banquet, Weldon Gill killed himself. The circumstances were described in a further report from Marcus Fielden to the Executive Council of the W.S.A.:

> . . . so it obvious an even further factor had entered the picture. For the second time in almost as many days I again had to revise my thinking about the future of the interstellar program. There is still a price to pay, of course, and Gill was the first to pay it. But I am convinced that in the long run intersellar man will evolve to heights unheard of on this small planet. It is as if Nature herself had a hand in this when she gave man this intersellar trigger which can only be released once—but which, once released, forces him to become a creature of the cosmos.
>
> You know by now, of course, that Gill chose to remain on Earth because of his desire to have full vision restored. He was aware of the risk he was taking and agreed to become a test subject for our team of psychologists. But as I watched the accelerating deterioration of this strong personality it became almost impossible to maintain my scientific objectivity. Even the success of the eye transplants had little effect on his downward slide and his suicide was inevitable.

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The total desperation of his condition is best illustrated by the fact he knew the operation was a success and knew that within a month the healing process would be sufficiently advanced to enable him to join the others on Luna. However his private hell had become too intolerable to be borne even a moment longer, so he took what seemed the only logical way out.

The work on *Golden Hind II* is right on schedule and she will shortly be moved to Luna orbit from where she will begin the return voyage to Alpha Five. The colonists are in good spirits and have voiced no objections to their cramped quarters aboard the ship. Unfortunately hypothermia equipment for four extra persons takes up a lot of space, so the crowding is necessary.

Regarding the selection of personnel for the Amazon Project, I am fully aware that suitable female candidates do not, as it were, "grow on trees." So I suggest that steps be taken to organize an intensive selection and training program that will . . .

Golden Hind II was ready to leave.

Captain George Hender and his wife—and the other four male members of the second Centauri expedition and their wives—sat before a large video screen in a lounge of the Clavius Luna Complex. On the screen the image of Dr. Marcus Fielden loomed twice as large as life.

"I had wanted to be on Luna when this moment came," the scientist said regretfully, "but I am afraid the Agency ruled otherwise."

"A ruling based on your own recommendations," Hender pointed out. "After all, Marcus, you have served your three years. Now you have to be satisfied with terra firma."

Fielden smiled. "True. But at least I know where I belong. You people, on the other hand, are going to be like kids in a candy store. With the whole universe to choose from, which goody do you go to next?"

Which indeed? As more ships became available, Hender knew that Alpha Five would not hold him for long. Earthlike or alien, with or without pressure domes, all worlds were now grist for the starman's mill.

All except one.

Marguerite stirred beside him. "Strange," she said.

The image on the screen cocked a quizical eyebrow. "Strange?"

"Knowing I can never return to Earth again." She twisted her hands together nervously.

"It isn't too late, you know," Fielden said. Across a quarter of a million miles of space and through

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the screen it seemed the huge eyes looked directly at her husband. "Well, George?"

Hender accepted the hint. Turning to his bride of less than a week, he took one of her hands in his.

Then, gently: "You heard the man. What do you want to do?"

She forced a smile. "Sorry dear. You're not going to get rid of me that easily."

From his office in one of Earth's great universities, Fielden nodded approvingly. "Marguerite, do you feel any—ah—symptoms?"

She grimaced. "I feel tired."

"Nothing else?"

"I don't think so."

The man on Earth looked relieved. "I'm glad to hear that. For a three-year-plus you are not doing badly at all. And you will be in hypothermia in a few hours, so you can look forward to sleeping the years away until you get to Alpha Five."

"Gill's World," corrected Brian McEvoy.

Fielden blinked. "I beg your pardon?"

The young astronaut grinned. Relaxed and completely recovered from his bout with Terran Madness, he repeated, "Gill's World. We agreed that should be the name for the planet." He added earnestly: "I hope you can talk the Agency into making it official—"

"Gill's World, eh?" The scientist was clearly pleased by the suggestion. "A fine tribute to a good man."

McEvoy hugged the blond girl at his side. "Not that it matters—unless you want to reach us. If you do, that's the address."

Suddenly feeling his years, Marcus Fielden slumped back into his chair and stared at the five men on his screen. They were the first representatives of a new breed. It would be a long time before science knew how they had got that way—what mysterious mechanism had caused Earth to reject them. Something peculiar in the air and ecology of Gill's World? The possibility was one of the reasons two of the women trained biochemists. If an answer were found, it was certain Marguerite Hender and her four female companions would have as much a part in the finding as their men. They were determined young persons who would surely redefine the role of their sex—and why not? The archaic social customs of Earth would have little meaning on a world that made men aliens on their home planet.

In fact, Fielden told himself ruefully, *I doubt their descendants of ten thousand years hence will have even heard of Earth.*

THE crew of *Enterprise* had not found any habitable planets around Barnard's Star. But one world's strange life forms, existing in near vacuum, had occupied them in fascinated study for twenty-three

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months. Then they had reentered hypothermia aboard their starship, expecting eventual revival amid the familiar worlds of Sol. They did not know of the high-energy signal speeding toward them at the velocity of light. Similar signals from even more powerful transmitters were on their way towards Lalande 21185 and Epsilon Eridani.

Enterprise was still more than five light-years from Earth when its detectors picked up the first pulse. Like a huge metal flower its high-gain immediately deployed one hundred meter fine-mesh petals to gather in the complex code that followed. The message was received and recorded and acknowledged in approximately one hundred and three seconds. The ship's computer control then withdrew the high-gain back into its folded position, rolled and turned the vessel until its command module was pointed on another but equally precise heading.

Another two hundred and eighteen seconds went by as circuits were checked and verified.

Finally electronic instructions were channeled through the control core, past the landing module housing and fuel tanks to a slave computer within the drive module. The slave responded. Banked nuclear fires within the drive's shielded core gradually returned to life, pumping megawatts of power into huge control coils. A trail of faint luminescence appeared between the coils as charged nuclear particles were hurled away from the ship at fractionally less than the speed of light.

Enterprise was on its way toward Alpha Centauri.

At about the same time another starship, *Amazon I,* lifted from Earth toward deep space.

To be the problem of the men from Alpha. ★

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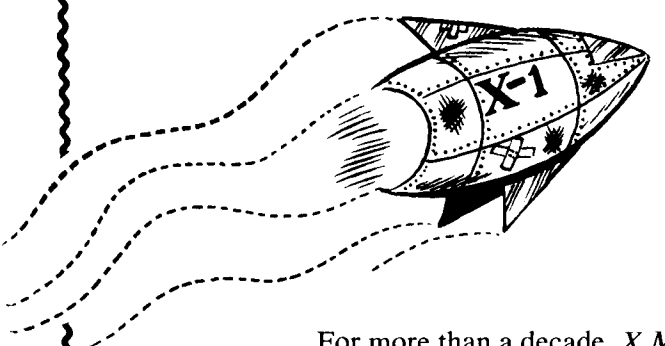

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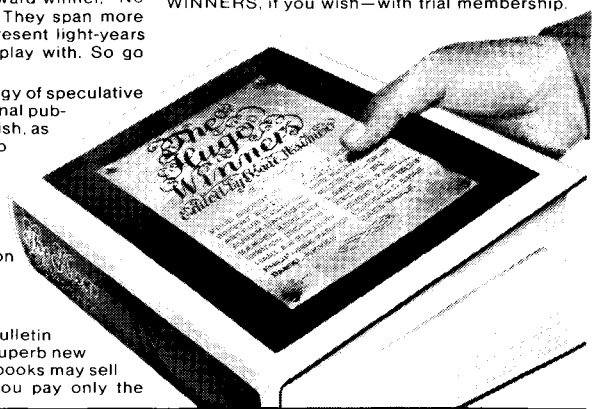

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